

Engaging Fathers as a Strategy for Child Welfare Practice

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Of all the rocks upon which we build our lives, we are reminded today that family is the most important. And we are called to recognize and honor how critical every father is to that foundation. They are teachers and coaches. They are mentors and role models. They are examples of success and the men who constantly push us towards it.”
—“Barack Obama, Father’s Day Speech”, Chicago, Illinois, June 15, 2008

Introduction

Fathers Are Important! Over the course of time, we have learned more about the essential roles of both mothers and fathers in the healthy development of their children. Contemporary studies consistently show that children with involved, loving fathers are much more likely to do well in school, have healthy self-esteem, exhibit empathy and pro-social behavior, and avoid high-risk behaviors, such as drug use, truancy, and delinquent activity, than children who have uninvolved fathers (Horn & Sylvester, 2002). Often, however, child-serving systems seem to discount the importance of fathers’ involvement. They often seem to treat payment of child support as fathers’ only critical responsibility to their children. Financial support *is* important, but data show that outcomes for children will improve not by virtue of financial support alone, but also through high-quality interactions between fathers and their children. Despite popular opinion, most non-custodial fathers do pay child support; and when they do not, most often it is due to an inability, not an unwillingness to

pay the support. Fathers have stated that our society has this judgment that if a father pays his child support, he has been a good father and provider.

In the behavioral health field, sometimes we assume that fathers (and especially fathers of color) do not care when they are not present at their children’s appointments. As a group, fathers are less likely to attend meetings than mothers. A father who is absent from an appointment, however, is often assumed to be an “**absent father**,” while a similar judgment is rarely expressed about a mother in the same circumstance. In fact, most fathers are not absent fathers. Both systemic and historical factors help us to understand why fathers may sometimes be or appear to be less involved in the lives of their children than mothers are. Fathers who live with their children are more likely to have close, enduring relationships with their children than those who do not. For many decades; however, the stability of family relationships within which children are raised has significantly eroded. Forty-three percent of first marriages dissolve within 15 years, and

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approximately 60 percent of divorcing couples have children. Roughly one million children each year experience the divorces of their parents. Nearly 20 million American children (27 percent) live in single-parent homes. Eighteen percent of the single parents who currently live with their children are men, while 82 percent are women. (Of the single parents who are fathers, 8 percent are raising *three or more* children under 18 years of age.) The number of single fathers in the U.S.—now 2.5 million—has increased more than six-fold from 400,000 in 1970. Forty-two percent of single fathers are divorced, 38 percent have never married, 16 percent are separated, and four percent are widowed. Seventy-three percent have an annual family income of \$50,000 or less. Compared to children born to married parents, children born to co-habiting parents are three times as likely

to experience eventual father absence; and children born to unmarried, *non*-cohabiting parents are four times as likely to live in a father-absent home.

From 1995 to 2000, the proportion of children living in single-parent homes declined slightly, while the proportion of children living with two married parents remained stable. Still, 24 million children (34 percent) today do not live with their biological fathers. Approximately 26 percent of absent fathers live in a different state than their children. Approximately 40 percent of children in father-absent homes have not seen their fathers even once during the past year. Approximately 50 percent of children not living with their fathers have never set foot in their fathers' homes. Clearly these statistics illustrate that the issue of fatherhood and parenting is much more complicated than is typically represented by society.

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“It is easier for a father to have children than for children to have a real father.”

—Pope John XXIII

Background

According to *Steven Mintz (1992)*, four key themes emerge from his examination of the history of fatherhood and motherhood. The first is that men and women’s family roles have not evolved in a single linear direction. It has become common in recent years to discuss the history of motherhood and fatherhood in terms of a long-term shift from patriarchy and hierarchy to increasing egalitarianism and androgyny. I will argue that this model of historical change is inadequate to capture the complexities of historical change. A second major theme is that there has never been a single, unitary family role for women or men. Rather, motherhood and fatherhood have varied along and across lines of race, ethnicity, class, and religion. I would suggest that the diversity that characterizes the roles of fathers and mothers today

mirrors the lack of uniformity one finds in the past. Third, we shall closely examine the expanding role of the state and growing professional expertise in altering the roles of mother and father.

ENGAGING FATHERS IN CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE IS IMPORTANT

A good father is critical to the optimal development and well-being of a child. A father’s role is more than that of economic provider and includes nurturing, care-giving, and emotional support. Successful fatherhood correlates with strongly positive outcomes. They can be part of the solutions to meet their children’s needs for safety, stability/permanence, and well-being.

Fathers’ involvement can positively support their children’s safety and well-being in many other ways too (see *Table 1* below).

TABLE 1
Workload Balancing Based on “The Peak” Number

Children/Youth from Fatherless Homes	Children/Youth from Homes with Fathers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 63 percent of youth suicides ▪ 90 percent of homeless and runaway youth ▪ 85 percent of youth who exhibit behavioral disorders ▪ 71 percent of all high school dropouts ▪ 75 percent of all youth in chemical abuse centers ▪ 70 percent of youth in state-operated institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 37 percent of youth suicides ▪ 10 percent of homeless and runaway youth ▪ 15 percent of youth who exhibit behavioral disorders ▪ 29 percent of all high school dropouts ▪ 25 percent of all youth in chemical abuse centers ▪ 30 percent of youth in state-operated institutions

Dads can offer additional perspectives about the needs and strengths of their children, and resources within the community and family. Fathers and paternal relatives may offer social or financial resources (e.g., health insurance, survivor benefits, and child support funds) that can support a plan of reunification. In foster care situations, permanency for the child can be expedited by placing children with their non-resident fathers with paternal kin, or through early relinquishment or termination of the father's parental rights.

Barriers to Father Involvement:

- Child welfare professional and systemic bias;
- Overburdened workers may be hesitant to involve non-custodial fathers;
- Mothers' gate-keeping;
- Characteristics of non-custodial fathers (i.e., incarceration, homelessness, significant impairment by substance abuse, military, unable to contribute emotional or mental support to the mother or children);
- Child welfare professional's reluctance to involve a male perpetrator; and
- Domestic violence.

Strategic plan to engage fathers

Fathering can potentially be enhanced through programs that help/benefit a child's relationship to their parent, foster employment and economic opportunities if needed, change institutional expectations and practices to better support fathers, and encourage personal and economic involvement with their children. An agency must consider the following to have success in engaging fathers in the child welfare system:

1. Public interest in fatherhood, as well as the research supporting the importance of engaged fathers in healthy child development, continues to grow.
2. Previous efforts to promote engaged fathers through programmatic and policy changes provide a foundation for future work.

3. Dwindling public resources, changes in political priorities, and leadership changes have led to diminished state-level leadership and attention to fatherhood (politically, legislatively, administratively, and programmatically).
4. Siloed policy mandates and funding from federal and state public agencies are driving efforts to support fatherhood programs, but no one designated "leader" (public or private) in the state has emerged to convene, facilitate and integrate efforts.
5. Public and private stakeholders should build a collaborative, sustainable, statewide leadership structure that can successfully support multiple efforts to promote engaged, committed fatherhood.

Program Suggestions

The Contra Costa County Children & Family Services (CFS) Bureau of the Employment & Human Services Department implemented the Supporting Father Involvement (SFI) program, that continues to support ways for fathers to stay connected and benefit. *The program should be adopted for all of child welfare best practices models and program services for fathers and mothers.* Carolyn Cowan and Phillip Cowan, researchers for the University of California, Berkeley, conducted this research study and determined the effectiveness of father involvement within the family system. The Supporting Father Involvement (SFI) program is an evidence-based research intervention conducted by a number of counties within California by the University of California Berkeley. Originally funded in 2002 by the California Department of Social Services' Office of Child Abuse Prevention (OCAP), a small number of counties, including Contra Costa County, participated to:

1. Determine the effectiveness of increasing positive father involvement with their families;
2. Reduce child abuse and neglect;
3. Measure organizational culture change to determine if the family resource center implementing the intervention had an increase in father participation in other programs and services;

4. Provide a one-time educational presentation on improved outcomes for children in families where fathers would take a positive active role;
5. Provide a 16-week (2 hrs. per week) fathers' group;
6. Provide a 16-week (2 hrs. per week) couples' group;

All project participants also received case management services. The SFI data is collected through family assessments administered three times during the families' participation.

Results of the initial analysis of the data confirm:

- Families and children are healthier when fathers are more involved with parenting and working with mothers as co-parents and partners.
- Parents experience reduced stress and anxiety and are more satisfied with their relationships.
- Children are less hyperactive and aggressive.

According to the Cowans, researchers for the University of California, Berkeley, their hypothesis was that if *Social Services Agencies, and local community services providers* could reduce symptoms of distress in the participants, affect the quality of their relationship as a couple, improve each of their relationships with the child and with their families of origin, and help them to use social supports more effectively to cope with life stress, then they would have a positive preventive effect on child abuse and neglect and, more generally, healthy family development. The SFI team is now ready to determine cost effectiveness of findings and to make the knowledge base about the methods, strategies, and success of the program in engaging and supporting fathers and their families more readily available for providers both inside and outside California. The SFI programs should involve a wide range of practice models, policy, procedures, and interventions, reflecting the multiple domains of responsible fathering, the varied residential and marital circumstances of fathers, and the array of personal, relational, and ecological factors that influence men as fathers. It appears a consensus is emerging that responsible fathering means establishing paternity, being present in the child's life (even if divorced or unmarried), sharing economic

support, and being personally involved in the child's life in collaboration with the mother. The research literature on fathering has long been on empirical studies of specific fathering behaviors and notably short on theory and the bigger picture. And while innovative programs, e.g., the *San Mateo County Fatherhood Collaborative, Fatherhood and Male Involvement for Santa Clara County sponsored by First 5 and Santa Clara County SSA/DFCS' Fatherhood Initiative, The Bay Area Fathering Integrated Data System (BAYFIDS) Project, Australian All-Male Discussion Forums for Expectant Fathers, and the Florence Crittenden Services Fatherhood Program*, that provide a forum to address and support the importance of men and fathers taking an active role in the well-being of children and families to promote better fathering have multiplied in the past decade, they have often not been connected to either research or theory.

I would highly recommend that each county social services agency consider this program based on cost effectiveness of the findings, and the methods, strategies, and success of the program in engaging and supporting fathers and their families more readily available for services providers.

According to the Cowans, the case study continues to look at the factors that influence fathering and presents a systemic, contextual framework that highlights multiple interacting influences on the father-child relationship: father factors, mother factors, child factors, co-parental factors, and broader contextual factors, institutional barriers and the cost to agencies for not providing services to fathers. A principal finding of this case study is that fathering is influenced, even more than mothering, by contextual forces in the family and the community. A father who lacks a good relationship with the mother is at risk to be an irresponsible father, especially if he does not reside with the child, as is a father who lacks adequate employment and income. In particular, fathering programs should:

- a. involve mothers where feasible and, especially for unmarried fathers, families of origin;

- b. promote collaborative co-parenting inside and outside marriage;
- c. emphasize critical transitions such as birth of the child and divorce of the parents;
- d. deal with employment, economic issues, and community systems;
- e. provide opportunities for fathers to learn from other fathers; and
- f. promote the viability of caring, committed, and collaborative marriages.

Families come to the attention of the child welfare system to prevent the abuse or neglect of children, protect children from abuse or neglect, and/or find permanent families for those who cannot safely return to their families. Fathers can play a critical role in strengthening families to successfully care for their children, ensure their safety, and foster their well-being.

An assortment of challenges can contribute to relatively low involvement by fathers in child welfare practice. Among them:

Fathers are generally much less immediately available to child welfare systems than are mothers. Most children who are removed and placed in protective foster care come from homes where their fathers are not living; it takes time, effort, and resources to locate those fathers. According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services' *"What about the Dads?"* study, child welfare workers clearly *know* that the mother is the biological parent of the child; but only dna testing or other time-consuming processes can establish paternity. Unless paternity has been established, a named father is not considered to be legally related to the child and cannot participate in court proceedings about the child. Mothers are often the gatekeepers to the father's participation and sometimes provide false information about the father or request that the father have no contact with the child, making it difficult to know the truth about either parent, and difficult to balance the mother's wishes with the best interest of the child. Child welfare agency culture often focuses on

the needs of mothers and their children, while attention to fathers is often viewed as "punitive" in tone, typically related to child support enforcement. Some child welfare workers admit that the obligation to report fathers to child support undermines engaging them in the child welfare process.

Few services and resources are designed to "fit" fathers' needs. Many fathers work long hours and need services to be provided during non-traditional work hours, and fathers' situations may pose a barrier to contact (e.g., homeless or transient, live out-of-state, or lack reliable transportation). Parenting classes and support groups are typically designed for mothers, and service providers usually focus on the primary relationship between the mother and the child. When faced with these challenges, as well as high caseloads, child welfare workers often put less effort into engaging fathers in the case process because it is just "more difficult."

It is recommended that there be more attention paid to several key considerations in efforts to effectively engage fathers involved with the child welfare system. First, programs should utilize different approaches for engaging fathers than those used for engaging mothers, taking into account sensitivity to gender and cultural assumptions about gender roles and the benefits of fathers working with fathers. In addition, fathers should 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 and maternal kin. Third, agency practices should require that both parents (not just the custodial parent) are contacted when problems and the need for decisions about the child arise. In fact, agencies should intentionally examine *any* biases and assumptions they may hold regarding a father's willingness to participate in the parenting process. These considerations about engagement impact agency policy, protocols, collaboration with other community agencies, workload, training, funding, and the identification and location of fathers.

Conclusion

The collaborative leadership structure should engage university partners to define, operationalize and evaluate “father engagement” as an outcome in human service efforts. Currently, there are a number of “father-friendly assessments” developed by organizations, such as the National Fatherhood Initiative and the Quality Improvement Center on Non-Residential Fathers that provide a framework for assessing agency policy, practice, cultural norms, staff training and other areas critical to quality practice in engaging and working with fathers. These tools are an important first step in the change process, but research and experience confirm that “hands-on” support for organizations interested in applying these tools is critically important.

A number of community-based agencies have had significant success in raising community awareness about fatherhood, creating organizational cultures that welcome and value the engagement and participation of fathers and in recruiting and retaining fathers in organizational programs and activities. The strategies including public awareness materials, marketing materials for programs and organizational change ideas that can be shared broadly with fatherhood stakeholders as a foundation on which to build future efforts. Language and concepts used by stakeholders in the fatherhood movement may be detrimental to advocates' efforts to change the public's understanding of fathers. Community-based and social services agencies need more stable, ongoing financial resources to really engage in developing a body of effective fatherhood programs. Given the current budget crisis in California and nationally, the likelihood of obtaining increased, sustainable funding for fatherhood programs is low. Nevertheless, there are opportunities for 1) integration of fatherhood programs within existing, stable agencies and programs; 2) identifying the most promising models and leveraging funding for research and implementation; and, 3) for building public support

for fathers broadly as core actors in their children's healthy development and growth.

So, I would recommend identifying community-based agencies and regional social services agencies that can implement integrated services to promote fatherhood programs. Examples include: *San Mateo County Fatherhood Collaborative and Fatherhood and Male Involvement for Santa Clara County sponsored by First 5 and Santa Clara County SSA/DFCS' Fatherhood Initiative and Contra Costa County's Children & Family Services (CFS) Supporting Father Involvement (SFI)*. *We must as an agency integrate as many fatherhood services programs to promote the viability of caring, commitment, and collaboration.*

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