



## Research article

# Father involvement in child welfare: Associations with changes in externalizing behavior<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Nonresident fathers can have a significant impact on children's behavioral outcomes. Unfortunately, the impact of nonresident father involvement on the behavioral outcomes of children with child welfare involvement has received scant attention in the literature, a limitation the current study sought to address. A sample of 333 children in state custody in Illinois between the ages of six and 13 participated and were assessed using the externalizing behavior scale of the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) at regular intervals throughout their time in care. Father involvement was measured through a review of case files and interviews with child welfare workers. Growth trajectories were fit to children's externalizing behavior across time and were predicted using Time 1 characteristics. Father involvement, total non-father relative involvement, and gender (girls) was associated with lower baseline externalizing behavior and the African American children in the sample experienced higher baseline externalizing behavior. However, only Time 1 father involvement predicted slope trajectories after controlling for Time 1 externalizing behavior; more father involvement was associated with lower externalizing behavior trajectories. These results suggest that even in the unique and stressful context of child welfare, father involvement can be protective regarding children's externalizing behaviors.

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Fathers can have a significant impact on children's adjustment (Cookston and Finlay, 2006; Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid, & Bremberg, 2008). Further, not only resident father involvement but also noncustodial "nonresident" father involvement has been shown to be positively associated with adjustment. In a meta-analysis of nonresident father involvement, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) found that all four involvement categories studied – provision of child support, contact (e.g., visits), feelings of closeness, and authoritative parenting – were modestly associated with fewer externalizing behavior problems, but were not significantly associated with internalizing behavior. Amato and Gilbreth (1999) findings are encouraging for advocates of father involvement in families with child welfare involvement (Zanoni, Warburton, Bussey, & McMaugh, 2013), since the overwhelming majority of fathers of children with child welfare involvement are obviously nonresident fathers.

Unfortunately, the putative benefits to children of father involvement have not spawned much research on the subject in child welfare samples, but the literature that does exist points to the benefits fathers can confer. In terms of permanency outcomes, Malm and Zielewski (2009) found that children with fathers who provided both financial and non-financial

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support (e.g., visits, childcare) were three times as likely to be reunified as children who received neither form of support. In a 2008 Urban Institute report of father involvement in four states, [Malm, Zielewski, and Chen \(2008\)](#) found that children with highly involved fathers were discharged from foster care an average of five months sooner, and that children with nonresident father involvement were less than half as likely to experience another maltreatment allegation when the goal was reunification (32% versus 12%).

We are aware of just one study that has examined the effects of fathers or father figures on behavioral outcomes among children with child welfare involvement. [Marshall, English, and Stewart \(2001\)](#) studied 182 children with Child Protection Services (CPS) involvement at ages four and six using Longitudinal Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect (LONGSCAN) data. Their results indicated that it was only the presence or absence of a father figure, and not level of engagement or stability, that was associated with lower aggression scores on the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL). However, this effect was only present for six year olds, not four year olds, and only for families in which the primary caregiver was African American ([Marshall et al., 2001](#)). The LONGSCAN data used by [Marshall et al. \(2001\)](#) included children with both CPS contact and children who had been taken into state custody (officially removed from the home of a biological parent, with certain legal parenting rights suspended) and therefore did not examine the potential effects of father involvement only among children in the unique context of the child welfare custody. Further, [Marshall et al.'s \(2001\)](#) study was cross-sectional, which limits interpretation of any findings. For example, if a positive association between father involvement and externalizing behavior is found in a cross-sectional study, one cannot rule out the possibility that fathers are less involved when their children exhibit externalizing behavior, versus the conclusion that fathers might help to protect against and decrease externalizing behavior over time. The former conclusion is less tenable with longitudinal data, because any cross-sectional association is controlled for before assessing whether or not father involvement is associated with changes in externalizing behavior over time. The current study offers the first examination of the potential longitudinal association between father involvement and changes in externalizing behavior in a child welfare sample.

Fathers of children with child welfare involvement have not only been neglected in the empirical literature but also in actual child welfare practice. Prior research suggests that the child welfare system favors mothers and devotes less attention to the needs of fathers ([Franck, 2001](#); [O'Donnell, Johnson, D'Aunno, & Thornton, 2005](#)). For instance, workers report placing less value on fathers' involvement, exhibit passivity in their attempts to find and engage fathers, and devote little effort to acquiring information on uninvolved fathers ([O'Donnell, 2001](#); [O'Donnell et al., 2005](#)). Workers may have particularly little motivation to pursue fathers' involvement in families with children born to multiple fathers, due to the increased effort that may be required ([O'Donnell, 2001](#); [O'Donnell et al., 2005](#)). Though some evidence indicates that caseworkers hold generally positive attitudes toward fathers ([English, Brummel, & Martens, 2009](#)), they may have higher expectations for and more positive attitudes toward mothers, which could also influence fathers' lack of participation in their children's cases ([Bellamy, 2009](#); [Franck, 2001](#); [O'Donnell et al., 2005](#)). Further, Interpersonal Violence (IPV) is common in the overall population and in families of children in the child welfare system ([Centers for Disease Control, 2003](#)), which may create concerns among caseworkers about the safety of involving fathers. Additionally, caseworkers seem to emphasize fathers' potential as either financial providers or primary caregivers. By ignoring intermediate forms of involvement, such as visitation or phone calls, workers may miss important opportunities to engage fathers ([O'Donnell et al., 2005](#)).

Of course, there are notable concerns and barriers regarding many fathers of children in child welfare. In terms of engagement with the system, caseworkers often report that they have had difficulties in terms of receiving a return call from fathers, not having valid contact information, fathers' conflict with biological mothers and fathers not showing to scheduled visitations (e.g., [Coakley, Kelley, & Bartlett, 2014](#)). In a report commissioned by the Children's Bureau ([Malm, Murray, & Geen, 2006](#)), a survey of over 1000 child welfare specialists revealed the following primary barriers to involving fathers in case planning: substance abuse (58%); criminal justice involvement (52%); inadequate housing (42%); unemployment (41%); domestic violence (33%); and prior finding of abuse/neglect (30%). However, in the same study, mothers experienced similar barriers and with higher frequencies, the only exception being criminal justice involvement; fathers experienced a higher percentage of criminal justice involvement. Therefore, many of the same barriers to father involvement exist regarding mothers' involvement (e.g., substance abuse, abuse and neglect, incarceration) among children in foster care, and yet the default permanency goal for children when they enter foster care is reunification, a goal that in the majority of cases involves reunification with the mother. In other words, the barriers and concerns that exist to involving fathers may be given more weight than the barriers involving mothers, which could represent a systemic bias against father involvement with possible consequences for children's well-being.

Without research support for the contexts in which fathers might be a benefit, any potential systemic bias or apathy regarding father involvement becomes difficult to challenge. The current study seeks to fill a need in the literature by studying the effects of father involvement on externalizing symptoms in a sample of children in foster care, representing just the second study to do so with this population after [Marshall et al. \(2001\)](#). We hypothesize that father involvement will be associated with more rapid declines in externalizing behavior over time. Given that the father involvement literature has on occasion found benefits only for either boys or girls ([Sarkadi et al., 2008](#)), and that the only study of father involvement and externalizing behavior in a foster care sample found an effect for race/ethnicity (African American father involvement was more associated with fewer externalizing problems, [Marshall et al., 2001](#)), we seek to determine if any benefit of father involvement is moderated by the child's gender or the child's race/ethnicity. However, these are exploratory aims rather than hypotheses because the broader non-resident father involvement literature has not consistently found a moderating effect of race or gender on the association between father involvement and behavioral outcomes ([Amato & Gilbreth, 1999](#)).

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