



Fathers matter: involving and engaging fathers in the child welfare system process



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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that children with involved and engaged fathers tend to have more positive outcomes relative to physical, cognitive, and social emotional health. Of children who become involved in the child welfare system, involving multiple parents in the case (e.g. mother and father) often results in a greater chance of a child returning home, fewer placement episodes, and reduced trauma that may be caused by separation anxiety. With the rise of single parenting homes (which are mostly maternal) in the United States, child welfare agencies are examining the efficacy of engaging multiple caregivers (esp. fathers) in the child welfare process. Research suggests that in order to involve fathers in child welfare processes, practices and policies must be intentional in implementing systems and protocols that encourage involvement of all parents regardless of relationship status of the parents. However, few child welfare agencies are required to inquire about fathers or involve fathers in the child's case. The purpose of this paper is to highlight efforts of the Connecticut Comprehensive Outcome Review (CCOR) process and discuss challenges and lessons learned from interviews and listening forums/focus groups that included social workers and fathers who are involved in the child welfare system in the state of Connecticut. Recommendations and considerations on engaging and involving fathers are discussed.

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There has been a dramatic rise in the number of children living in households without fathers in the United States. Thirty percent of children live in homes where the biological father is absent (Kreider & Ellis, 2011); this is the most in the nation's history (Nock & Einolf, 2008). Research suggests that the greatest disparity of absent non-resident fathers is among minorities, specifically African American and Latino families (Coakley, 2013). Unfortunately, communities with high reports of absent fathers tend to also have high rates of poverty, crime, and young men in prison (Blankenhorn, 1995; Merrill, Schweizer, Schweizer, & Smith, 1996; Popenoe, 1996). There seems to be increased strain when a household is managed by a single parent. Research suggests that households with absent fathers are also 2–3 times more likely to use drugs, have increased educational needs, and exhibit more health, emotional and behavioral problems than children with present fathers (Horn & Sylvestor, 2002). While there are circumstances where households without fathers do well, there is a need to further explore the social correlates associated with families who are at increased risk for experiencing these negative outcomes.

Conversely, research has found that children with present, healthy, and involved fathers are more likely to do well in school and have healthy self-esteem and self-concepts (Horn & Sylvestor, 2002). Children with involved resident and non-resident fathers are also more likely to exhibit empathy and pro-social behaviors and avoid high-risk behaviors, which include drug use, truancy, and criminal activity compared to children who have uninvolved fathers (Horn & Sylvestor,

2002). Given greater risks (i.e., child abuse and neglect) are associated with single parent households, and these risk factors become predictors of poor social emotional development and future delinquency, there seems to be much to gain in households/families that have more than one involved caregiver (Horn & Sylvestor, 2002).

According to Nock and Einolf (2008), the most common factors influencing father absence are divorce, out-of-wedlock births, and incarceration. Additional factors that contribute to uninvolved absent fathers include homelessness and living in another state or country (Burrus, Green, Worcel, Finigan, & Furrer, 2012). While the reasons that fathers are not involved vary, data suggests that systems-level efforts that focus on reunification facilitates healthy child development and reduces the time a child spends in the welfare system (Burrus et al., 2012; Malm, Murray, & Geen, 2006). For example, according to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) and Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS), children with present fathers tend to have shorter lengths of stay in foster care system, fewer placement episodes, and greater stability in foster care (Velázquez, Edwards, Vincent & Reynolds, 2007). Furthermore, research suggests that when fathers were identified by social agencies to participate in the child welfare process, most fathers were willing and able to participate (Malm et al., 2006). In a more recent study, when fathers were identified during the child welfare process, their child spent less time in foster care and were significantly more likely to be reunified and/or receive permanent placement with a parent, than in cases

where the child's father was not identified (Burrus et al., 2012). Given the consensus that engaging fathers in the child welfare process results in positive benefits to the children, more efforts are needed that identify strategies to increase father participation with an eye towards promoting positive outcomes for their children (Velazquez, Edwards, Vincent, & Reynolds, 2009).

Research indicates that the unique ways that fathers interact with their children contribute to healthy development from infancy through early adulthood (Heinrich, 2014). This is equally true of fathers involved in the child welfare system (Burrus et al., 2012). In recent years, the critical link between promoting responsible fatherhood and positive outcomes for children has attracted attention across the political spectrum at both the national and local levels, one being the Connecticut Comprehensive Outcome Review (CCOR) (CCOR Final Report, 2011). This emerging paradigm shift concerning rethinking the role of fathers in the child welfare process has resulted in the development of pilot research, policy reform, the allocation of resources to promote fatherhood initiatives, and the expansion of organizational level activities to support fathers (e.g. raising awareness among social agencies) (e.g. Gordon, Oliveros, Hawes, Iwamotom, & Rayford, 2012; Gordon, Watkins, Wilhelm, & Rayford, 2005; Velazquez et al., 2009). Organizations like the Administration for Children and Families and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and have participated in efforts across the United States to promote and support father engagement efforts for those involved in the child welfare system. Many of these national efforts have led to local and statewide social service agencies to evaluate the extent to which they include fathers. The goal of this paper is to document Connecticut's interests and efforts to help promote the healthy engagement and involvement of fathers with children involved in the child protection/welfare system. These efforts appear to be informed by the growing body of research and policies that focus on supporting healthy father involvement (Gordon, Hunter, et al., 2012; Gordon, Oliveros, Hawes, Iwamotom & Rayford, 2012; Gordon et al., 2005).

1. Father involvement in Connecticut

From 2004 to 2010 the number of children residing in single parent homes in Connecticut increased by 14%, which is higher than the national increase of 12% (from 21,361,000 to 24,297,000) (Annie E. Casey Kids Count Data Center, 2009; US Census Bureau Data, 2005). Connecticut has embarked on efforts to respond to the increasing rate of single parent households as it relates to the added risks/challenges faced by families involved in the child welfare system. This effort was based on statewide findings from The Connecticut Comprehensive Outcome Review (CCOR), a system-wide evaluation of child welfare services that was modeled after the federally funded Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) (CCOR Reviews, 2010).

Similar to the CFSR, the CCOR was developed to evaluate practices and services provided throughout the child welfare system in the state of Connecticut. This review was designed to identify strengths and weaknesses within the child welfare system by evaluating staff, families, and organizational policies and procedures as a strategy for improving service delivery. Further, this systems-wide review was designed to create a dialogue between families and service providers. This systems-wide review was also designed to give families the opportunity to understand how their feedback was being used to improve policies and practices within Connecticut's child welfare system.

Observations from the CCOR increased Connecticut's desire to examine its practices as it relates to the healthy involvement of fathers for children who are involved in the child welfare system. A greater understanding of father involvement in child welfare services is important because of its potential to expand theories concerning the prevention of child abuse and neglect. Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological theory provides a framework for understanding children involved in the child welfare system through its focus on both proximal (e.g. family and peers) and distal (e.g. neighborhood, schools and social service; including the

child welfare system) factors that promote and/inhibit the way in which children live, learn and grow. This theory provides a contextual lens to understanding the multiple conditions that allows for the safe return of children to their families and fathers' role in supporting and facilitating this return. It also draws attention to the varying levels of interventions that are impacted when a child is referred into the child welfare/protection system (Gordon, Oliveros, et al., 2012). In the ecological framework, the micro-system, which involves the family unit, is one of the most essential components to promoting the healthy development in children, especially young children (Belsky, 1980, 1993). However, in practice, this unit of analysis is often biased because many systems and social agencies neglect the importance of paternity and instead focus solely on maternity (Gordo, Hunter, et al., 2012). Given child welfare systems' overwhelming focus on maternal caretakers and their needs, many policies and procedures neglect the overlapping and unique ways that fathers could contribute to the care of their children. Further, more research is needed to further understand how service providers' reintegration plans and practices may better assess and acknowledge both maternal and paternal roles.

Research on why the child welfare/protection system focuses on mothers highlights the unique threats and challenges that some fathers pose to the child welfare case (Malm et al., 2006). Among one of the most common explanations for the exclusion of fathers is based on an unhealthy dissolution of the romantic relationship. This is especially true in cases where the mother has moved on to a new relationship (O'Donnell et al., 2005). Further, in a systematic review, researchers (Maxwell, Scourfield, Fetherstone, Holland, & Tolman, 2012) observed that social workers were more likely to adopt an all-good or all-bad view of fathers. Once fathers were labeled as bad fathers, the level of father involvement was limited or absent. One common explanation of negative labeling was the result of reported histories of domestic violence (Maxwell et al., 2012). Due to the possibility of violence, careful attention to circumstances of safety should be factored into our understanding of father involvement with special consideration of additional social factors that impact his inclusion in the child welfare process.

O'Donnell et al. (2005) found that mothers were more likely to conceal the identity of the fathers from child welfare service providers in not only cases of domestic violence but also when there was a potential threat to the mother's financial assistance. Finally, service providers within the child welfare systems often trust and treat mothers as gatekeepers of their children and therefore are assumed to be the sole protector (O'Donnell et al., 2005). While this view has important implications for the safety and protection of mothers and their children, it neglects the complex structures and arrangements that may be in place that negatively and positively impact the healthy involvement of fathers as their children enter the child welfare system (Gordon, Hunter, et al., 2012; Gordon, Oliveros, Hawes, et al., 2012). Given the diverse threats and challenges to engaging fathers, it is important that these issues are explored to address father inclusion.

There have been a number of measures and procedures developed to document and support the healthy development of children involved in the child welfare system (Gordon, Hunter, et al., 2012; Gordon, Oliveros, et al., 2012). However, little or no considerations have been made to examine how these sources of information are impacted when applied to fathers. Given the limited and preliminary information known about how the child welfare system interacts with fathers and serves them in support of the child's safe and timely return to their family, organizations like the National Family Preservation Network has led many efforts aimed at increasing the training and resources that address father involvement (National Family Network, 2012). This paper will provide a glimpse into the experiences of fathers involved in the child welfare system in the state of Connecticut. To accomplish this task, we relied on information from "listening forums," that were structured like focus groups. The goal of these listening forums was to identify ways to facilitate and improve the healthy and active involvement of men and fathers.

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