

Series: Pursuing Permanency

Post 3: The Valuable Role of Fathers

Where do fathers and their families fit into foster youth's permanency plan? This is one of the questions the 2016 CYF Learning Cohort has been discussing. Too often fathers and their side of children's families are overlooked when it comes to exploring family connections and placing a child who is in the child welfare system. This post looks at the benefits of a father's involvement in his child's life, and how to better engage a child's father and paternal family when looking for a permanent home or even just a permanent connection for a youth in care. Also check out the National Fatherhood Initiative for more resources, including the free e-book "[7 Steps to Starting a Successful Fatherhood Program](#)," and [a tool to assess](#) how well your organization engages fathers in its programs

A Father's Impact

Fathers are incredibly important to the development and flourishing of children. As [ZERO to THREE points out](#), there are many ways fathers can positively impact their children.¹ For instance, "children with involved fathers tend to be more patient" and are less likely to get in trouble at home, in the neighborhood, and at school, and "rough-and-tumble kind of play that fathers engage in with their young children helps them regulate their feelings and behavior." But, "When fathers are found to be emotionally and physically remote from their infants at 3 months and again at 12 months of age, by the time they enter preschool the children were found to be more aggressive with their peers." Below are some other effects of fathers' presence and absence, from "[A Guide for Father Involvement in Systems of Care](#)" from the American Institutes for Research.²

Children/Youth in Fatherless Homes

- 63% of youth suicides
- 90% of homeless and runaway youth
- 85% of youth who exhibit behavioral issues
- 71% of all high school dropouts
- 75% of all youth in chemical abuse centers
- 70% of youth in state-operated institutions

Benefits of an Active Father

- Let's a child know they are loved and provides security and emotional support
- Provides a positive male role model
- Provides the child with greater financial resources
- Enhances a child self-esteem and intellectual development
- Increases a child's chances for academic success and lowers chances of dropping out of school
- Lowers a child's chances for early sexual activity
- Lowers a child's chances for youth suicide
- Lowers a child's chances for juvenile delinquency and adult criminality
- Provides a child with guidance and discipline

¹ <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1440-the-daddy-factor-5-ways-dads-make-a-big-difference>

² http://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/AIR_Fatherhood_Guide_061413_0.pdf

Beyond this array of benefits, the authors of the paper “[What about the Dads?: Child Welfare Agencies’ Efforts to Identify, Locate and Involve Nonresident Fathers](#),” from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, make an interesting observation from their interviews³:

“Administrators said father involvement could be beneficial for the child welfare agency, birth mothers, and fathers themselves. Father involvement can allow some children to avoid out-of-home care altogether or can lead to quicker permanency when a child can be placed with his or her father or his kin. Administrators noted that quicker permanency saves child welfare agency resources, allowing agencies to use resources for other cases in need. Agencies could benefit from father involvement by reduced overall caseloads in the long run, even if more intensive efforts increased time spent on cases in the short term. Administrators also said that father involvement could lead to a more positive work environment; if fathers are meaningfully involved in cases, administrators said work could be more fulfilling to a case manager with a social work background. Finally, a minority of administrators mentioned that birth mothers might feel less isolated or stressed if children’s fathers were involved. A small number also mentioned that father involvement might lead to fathers feeling more empowered and responsible for their children.”

This is not to say all fathers should be equally sought out and involved. Some fathers may have a history of addiction, domestic abuse or child violence, or have high levels of conflict with their child’s mother, and reintroducing them into the lives of their children could be destabilizing, as “[What about the Dads?](#)” reminds. Additionally, working to involve father could mean additional costs, time, and complications.

Level of Father Engagement with Youth Aging Out of Care

Chapin Hall has done a longitudinal study on the outcomes of youth aging out of care, looking at them in four different waves: [first](#) at the age of 17 or 18 right before they leave care, [second](#) at the age of 19, [third](#) around the age of 21, and [fourth](#) at ages 23-24.⁴ Using Chapin’s findings, here’s a snapshot of how

³ <https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/74611/report.pdf>

⁴ https://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/CS_97.pdf;
https://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/ChapinHallDocument_4.pdf;
https://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/ChapinHallDocument_2.pdf;
https://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/Midwest_Study_Age_23_24.pdf

THE FATHER ABSENCE CRISIS IN AMERICA

There is a crisis in America. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 24 million children in America—one out of three—live without their biological father in the home. Consequently, there is a “father factor” in nearly all of the societal ills facing America today. Research shows when a child is raised in a father-absent home, he or she is affected in the following ways...

POVERTY



4X GREATER RISK OF POVERTY

BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS

MORE LIKELY TO HAVE BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS



MOM-CHILD HEALTH



2X GREATER RISK OF INFANT MORTALITY

INCARCERATION

MORE LIKELY TO GO TO PRISON



CRIME



MORE LIKELY TO COMMIT CRIME

TEEN PREGNANCY



7X MORE LIKELY TO BECOME PREGNANT AS TEEN

CHILD ABUSE

MORE LIKELY TO FACE ABUSE AND NEGLECT



SUBSTANCE ABUSE



MORE LIKELY TO ABUSE DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

CHILD OBESITY

2X MORE LIKELY TO SUFFER OBESITY



EDUCATION



2X MORE LIKELY TO DROP OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL

Source: National Fatherhood Initiative

close these young adults felt with their fathers compared to their mothers (the last two years, two additional categories were added: “not living” and “don’t know if alive”).

How close do you feel to your parent?

	Age 17-18	Age 19	Age 21	Age 23-24
Very Close to	Mother: 37.4% Father: 18.6%	Mother: 38.2% Father: 18.3%	Mother: 29.2% Father: 12.5%	Mother: 27.2% Father: 13.8%
Somewhat close to	Mother: 26.2% Father: 17.3%	Mother: 28.8% Father: 19.6%	Mother: 25.8% Father: 18.1%	Mother: 26.2% Father: 16.4%
Not very close to	Mother: 14.5% Father: 13.2%	Mother: 12.6% Father: 12.2%	Mother: 9.8% Father: 7.5%	Mother: 10.5% Father: 10.0%
Not at all close to	Mother: 20.9% Father: 48.9%	Mother: 20.5% Father: 49.9%	Mother: 17.8% Father: 28.8%	Mother: 16.3% Father: 25.5%
Not living			Mother: 13.7% Father: 14.7%	Mother: 15.5% Father: 18.3%
Don't know if alive			Mother: 3.7% Father: 18.3%	Mother: 4.5% Father: 16.1%

It is clear that these young adults felt much closer to their mothers than their fathers, many not even sure if their father was still alive. This does not necessarily indicate a father’s willingness to become involved – some fathers may have felt shut out of their children’s lives at a young age and subsequently detached from engaging with them, or perhaps were incarcerated. But there is a contrast between the closeness of father-child and mother-child relationships.

Furthermore, “[A Guide for Father Involvement in Systems of Care](#)” cites the following findings from “[What about Dads?](#)”:

- “Most children in foster care were not living with their fathers at the time they were removed from their homes.”
- “**Non-resident fathers were identified in the case file 88 percent of the time** when the child welfare case was opened; but the child welfare agency **contacted the non-resident fathers only about half of the time (55 percent)** during the child’s stay in foster care.”
- “Non-resident fathers of children in foster care were often not involved in case planning efforts. **Fewer than a third (30 percent) of fathers visited their children, and even fewer (28 percent) expressed interest in the child living with them.**”
- “Child welfare caseworkers were between 3 and 15 times more likely to answer ‘don’t know’ to questions about the fathers than to questions about the mothers.”

A big question here is why aren’t fathers more involved? The possibilities vary. It could be they simply are disinterested in their children and have chosen not to be engaged. Perhaps the paternity of the child isn’t clear. Maybe the fathers don’t feel comfortable or confident in their role as a parent, the piece “[Engaging Noncustodial Fathers in Child Welfare Cases](#)” from the American Humane Association points

out.⁵ The paper adds that incarceration, poverty, low literacy, substance abuse, or lack of knowledge about the child could also be factors. A mother may also refuse to give information on the father because she “does not want the father to be considered as a placement resource or included in decision making.” Or, she “may be protecting that father from court involvement (e.g., if he has immigration issues, large child support arrearages, or pending criminal matters), or she may simply be ashamed that she is involved in an abuse or neglect proceeding and not want the father or his family to find out. Some mothers also shield their children from their fathers because of a history, on the father’s part, of past child maltreatment, or violent or criminal behavior.”

A literature review by the authors of “[What about the Dads?](#)” showed that other studies had found that some fathers’ contact with their children has been limited by the mothers because of unpaid child support. Also some fathers were hesitant to come forward when their children were in the child welfare system because they assumed they were only being approached for child support payments.

Perceptions of Fathers

One of the barriers to father engagement can come from the child welfare system. Case workers, judges, etc. may favor mothers in the process and be reluctant to consider fathers when considering permanency plans for youth. This can happen for a variety of reasons – “workload size, difficulty locating fathers, discomfort in working with men and lack of institutional support” -- but sometimes these decisions are influenced by preconceptions and biases, a more mother-oriented culture in child welfare, and staff’s experiences with fathers.⁶ “[The Importance of Fathers in the Healthy Development of Children](#)” from the U.S. Department for Health and Human Services notes⁷:

“Worker bias regarding father involvement appears to be the most widely researched barrier to fathers’ participation in child welfare case planning. One study found that caseworkers did not pay attention to birth fathers to the degree that they did to birth mothers.⁶⁴ At the same time, the fathers did not respond to outreach efforts as well as mothers, which testifies to the need to approach fathers with an understanding of their unique needs and feelings. At least in this one study, caseworkers were found to require that fathers demonstrate their connection to the child whereas the mothers’ connection was taken for granted.⁶⁵ Of course, characteristics of fathers who do not live with their children also can contribute to the difficulties in successfully engaging fathers—incarceration, homelessness, substance abuse, to name a few.” [The piece contains advice on working effectively with various types of fathers in a range of circumstances.]

How to Involve Fathers

Below are several suggestions from “[A Guide for Father Involvement in Systems of Care](#)” on how to better engage fathers (read the piece for additional suggestions for working with fathers who struggle with substance abuse, are incarcerated, gay, or have LGBT children). The paper notes three things first: “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

⁵ http://site.americanhumane.org/fatherhooddocs/children_atty_gal_brief_final.pdf

⁶ https://humanservices.ucdavis.edu/sites/default/files/reaching_out_wint_10.pdf

⁷ <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/fatherhood.pdf>

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 fathers' willingness to participate in the parenting process."

1. Identification

- Encourage mothers to identify fathers early in the child welfare case.
- Teach caseworkers to use alternative means to identify and locate fathers, including interviewing relatives and family friends; accessing TANF, child support, and other public databases; and using the authority of the court as needed.

2. Initial Contact

- The first contact between the agency and father is a unique opportunity to establish the basis for a positive, strengths-based relationship free from commonly identified negative assumptions about the father's interest in the relationship with the child.
- Engage fathers in ways that "fit" their particular situations and circumstances, with sensitivity to key cultural considerations.
- Make every effort to gain support of mothers, and reduce any barriers the mother has established that prevent or interfere with a father's engagement, including negotiation and mediation.
- Build trust by providing clear explanation to fathers of the current situation of the case, the father's role, the caseworker's role, agency expectations, and all policies that are relevant to his case.
- Continually state and emphasize the desire to establish and maintain the father-child relationship.

3. Family Conferencing

- Bring all of the adults who are interested and committed to the child into a planned network of support for safety, stability/permanence, and well-being. Don't get sidetracked in picking "the right model" (e.g., "family-group decision-making" versus "wraparound," "team decision-making" versus the "family unity" family conferencing approach).
- Use training, policies, contracts, and other mechanisms to embed family conferencing team processes in child welfare and cross-system practice.

4. Assessment

- Include all family members in comprehensive assessments (including fathers and paternal family members).
- Assess the strengths, needs, resources/assets, and supports of the father and the paternal family; identify services and supports needed by the father.
- Explore fathers' and paternal family members' willingness and ability to ensure the safety, permanence, and well-being of the child.

5. Safety Planning

- Actively involve fathers and paternal family members in developing safety plans.
- Consider how fathers might contribute (e.g., as informal service providers in the safety plan, as relative/kinship placement providers, or to supervise visits between the child and his/her parents).

6. Out-of-Home Placement

- Before placing a child in an unrelated home, first assess fathers' and paternal family members' homes as potential placements.
- Include fathers in determining the best placement for the child. Encourage and support foster parents, group home staff, residential treatment staff, hospital staff, kinship providers, and adoptive parents to build and maintain partnerships with birth or adoptive fathers.
- Provide services and supports to establish and maintain father-child relationships through telephone and mail contact, visitation, and case planning activities.

7. Service Delivery

- Actively involve fathers in setting goals, expressing concerns, and asking questions about service needs.
- Create/design services to meet the individual needs of the father and/or paternal family members. Services must be accessible to working fathers.
- Offer peer-led father support groups that address issues related to fatherhood, such as empowering men to take an active role in parenting, child development, and emotional issues; and developing key skills like active listening, positive discipline/behavior building, anger management, and basic parenting techniques.
- Ensure that service providers emphasize the importance of child relationships with both mothers and fathers.
- Expect and enable fathers to help monitor service provision and provide continuous feedback so that progress on the child's case plan is optimized.

8. Permanency Planning

- Involve fathers in all reviews of the service plan/case plan, and in developing the child's permanency plan.
- Ensure that fathers understand the permanency plan, and their role in it.
- Arrange for fathers to receive court notices regarding permanency hearings, and discuss with them the child welfare agency's recommendations to the court.
- Encourage and enable fathers to attend all court hearings.

Additional Resources

- Check out the National Fatherhood Initiative for more resources, including the free e-book "[7 Steps to Starting a Successful Fatherhood Program](#)," and [a tool to assess](#) how well your organization engages fathers in its programs⁸
- "[Bringing Back the Dads: Changing Practices in Child Welfare Systems](#)," from the American Humane Society⁹
- "[Identifying, Interviewing, and Intervening: Fathers and the Illinois Child Welfare System](#)," from Chapin Hall¹⁰
- Take a look at father involvement resources and curricula from the National Family Preservation network [here](#), including "[Best Practice for Father-Child Visits in the Child Welfare System](#)"¹¹

⁸ <https://goo.gl/TyhC7b>; <http://www.fatherhood.org/ffc>

⁹ <http://www.americanhumane.org/assets/pdfs/children/fatherhood/pc262.pdf>

¹⁰ http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/Fathers%20and%20Illinois%20Welfare%20Report_11_17_09.pdf

¹¹ <http://www.nfpn.org/father-involvement>; http://www.nfpn.org/Portals/0/Documents/father_child_visits.pdf

- [“The Importance of Fathers in the Healthy Development of Children,”](#) from the Department of Health and Human Services is a good read, and contains a Cultural Competence Self-assessment Questionnaire, Service Provider Edition
- [“Reaching Out: Current Issues for Child Welfare Practice in Rural Areas”](#) from UC Davis takes a look at the unique aspects of fatherhood and how to encourage father engagement

If you would like to share what your organization is doing on permanency or have questions or a particular permanency focus/subject you wish to see a post on, please email Natalie Goodnow at NGoodnow@lutherservices.org.