



Handout 8-4: Tips For Workers Working With Dads: Co-Parenting When Mom and Dad Don't Live Together and Are in Conflict

What can you do to help engage a non-resident father or mother when the caretaking parent is reluctant to have him or her involved? This tip sheet assumes that the father is the non-residential parent. We should always ask if there has been domestic violence in the past. If there has been domestic violence (including a restraining order) or other issues that indicate acute or severe risk, a consultation should be carried out before proceeding.

Ideas

- Have the child welfare worker serve as a go-between initially.
- Talk to each person separately.
- Build trust slowly — start small.
- Share responsibility.
- Take a problem-solving approach.
- Take each person's concerns and interests into account.
- Be clear on roles, expectations and tasks.
- Expand slowly.

For The Custodial Parent

- Ask, "What are your concerns about ____ (the other parent)?"
- Ask, "How could having him involved with the children benefit your children?"
- Ask, "How could this benefit you? Are there any potential advantages? (What is the starting point? What are the priorities?)"
- Ask, "What would you need to see to make the first step happen?"
- Keep following this process as you move toward more father involvement.

The custodial parent may bring up issues such as mental health problems, substance abuse, domestic violence or recent instability (employment, homelessness, etc.) on the part of the non-residential parent that are problems with respect to his visiting the children. This is an opportunity to go to the father and talk about these issues in the context of fatherhood and of being a good role model for his children. It may motivate him to seek help or to deal with a problem he has. It is a good way to enter the discussion. Also, remember to plan about safety if there are concerns about domestic violence, substance abuse or mental health. Seek consultation if you have questions.

Prepared by F. Mederos for the Fatherhood Initiative at the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families, September 2008.

For the Father/Non-Residential Parent

- Remind the father that visitation is not an opportunity to get information about his ex-partner.
- Education: Explain all that the custodial parent does. She should get credit for her work.
- Education: Talk about supportive co-parenting versus walking back in as the “emperor.” Discuss boundaries and the need to respect her central role.
- Ask, “What is your vision of fatherhood? Do you want to be involved?”
- Ask, “How could this benefit your children?”
- Ask, “What are your concerns? About her (custodial parent)? About the child?”
- Ask, “Are you willing to hear some suggestions about steps you can take to make this happen?” (If this involves bringing up issues that she has mentioned, talk about issues as if they were uncovered from a collateral source, if possible. This is even more critical if there is a history of domestic violence.)
- Ask, “What are the steps you can take to make this happen? Clarify this.”