

Father Engagement Research Brief

Identifying & Locating Dads

Background

Identifying and locating dads in child welfare is critical for child development and father-child relationship building. When dads are involved in their child/youth's life, children/youth are more likely to show lower levels of aggression and depression by age six as well as do better in school and have higher self-esteem.¹³ In terms of child welfare-related outcomes, children/youth with dads present tend to have shorter lengths of stay in foster care, fewer placement episodes, and greater stability in foster care.¹⁴ Due to the majority of child welfare cases involving fathers who do not live full-time with their children ("nonresident fathers"), the challenge of identifying and locating dads is all the more pressing. Historically, child welfare has focused on mothers as the primary clients. This is due in part to 73% of child protection families being single mother families.¹⁵ Despite this, 72-88% of children at risk for maltreatment have a father or father-figure involved in their life, highlighting the importance of identifying, locating, and involving dads in child welfare cases. However, when child welfare cases are named after the mother and the focus is predominantly on the mom's behavior, even in cases when the dad is responsible for abuse and/or neglect, this can lead to fathers left out of or not notified about the child welfare case. The lack of involvement of dads in child welfare is also connected to bias about fathers more generally. For example, reviews of child welfare research have found that dads are often portrayed in a negative light and terms like "parents" and "families" are used even though fathers may not have been included or involved, signaling a more systematic overlooking of the importance of fathers in child and family life.¹⁶



Fast Facts

Children/youth with father involvement are twice as likely to enter college or find stable employment after high school.¹

Children/youth who have positive and engaging relationships with adult males, especially those playing fathering role, are less likely to be neglected² and have better developmental outcomes in general.³

Current Trends in Child Welfare¹⁷

- 68% of fathers are identified at case-opening + 20% by the time the caseworker was interviewed
- 55% of nonresident fathers have at least one contact with a caseworker
- 40% of nonresident fathers were never identified
- 20% of nonresident fathers who were identified and had a known location were never contacted
- When the father's location is unknown by the mother, no additional sources are consulted in 44% of cases
- 31% of the 60% of nonresident dads who were identified were reported to be incarcerated



Research Brief: Identifying & Locating Dads

Racial Disproportionalities¹⁸

While father identification and location is a broad challenge, the impacts play out different across racial groups. For example, child welfare agencies were less likely to identify, locate, and contact Black fathers, when compared to White fathers. Furthermore, agencies were less likely to locate identified Latino fathers and less likely to contact them, once located. When looking at the child/case, caseworker, and agency factors that may contribute to this, child's age and caseworker's perception of their agency's support for parent locator services were associated with differences in identification, location, and contact. When looking at father characteristics that might explain these discrepancies, international migration was noted as a potential factor for Latino fathers but otherwise these differences across race were unexplained.



Fast Facts

Children/youth in high-risk families who have a positive relationship with a supportive adult male figure have been found to have better cognitive scores, perceived confidence, and social acceptance than children without positive male involvement.⁴

Children/youth with fathers who were highly involved left foster care five months sooner, on average.⁵

Children/youth with nonresident dads involved in their lives were less than half as likely to experience maltreatment in the future.⁶

Challenges

Father identification, location, and contact are connected to other workload concerns and case challenges. Since child welfare cases are typically tied to a mother, the amount of time and resources required to locate a father may impede a caseworker's other work on a case. An additional challenge is encountered when trying to locate and identify fathers if a mom is hesitant about or adamant against involving a dad in a case or is not open to providing information that could be used by caseworkers to locate a father. In a study done with caseworkers, several reasons were provided for moms not sharing information including feeling ashamed or embarrassed about her involvement with child welfare, feeling fearful or angry toward the father perhaps due to a history of violence, or that she has a poor relationship with the father.¹⁹ In addition, 53% of caseworkers from one study reported believing that fathers who don't live full-time with their children do not want to be involved in the case or decision-making for their child.²⁰ This belief is compounded by the common stereotypes of fathers as absent, uninterested in their child's life, and/or dangerous.²¹



Research Brief: Identifying & Locating Dads

Paternal Relatives

The benefits of father identification extend beyond just father and child/youth. Locating and contacting a father not only creates an opportunity for the father to engage with a child welfare case, but also allows paternal relatives to get involved and/or provide support to the child/youth and family as well. Father involvement in a case could look like them facilitating a child/youth's access to extended family members. Paternal relatives can help support the child/youth in an out-of-home placement and even serve as a placement resource.²² "Best interests of the child" extends beyond just the custodial parent and often includes additional supports from fathers as well as paternal relatives.²³



Fast Facts

Earlier research indicates that caseworkers generally feel less capable in their work with males.⁷

Children/youth in cases with identified fathers spent more time with a parent during the child welfare case and subsequently less time in foster care.⁸

Cases where the father was identified were 1.6 times more likely to result in reunification compared to cases where the father is not identified.⁹

Caseworker Training

Recognizing the challenge with father identification, location, and engagement more broadly, caseworkers see the need for additional training around working with fathers. While many caseworkers receive training on fathers—one study found that 70% of caseworkers had training on identifying, locating, or engaging fathers—there is still an expressed lack of caseworker confidence in navigating father finding and engagement.²⁴ Of particular importance is supervisor support for identification, location, and engagement of fathers. Researchers noted the influential effect of how caseworkers talk about dads. When caseworkers speak positively of dads, drawing on a strengths-based perspective, other caseworkers are influenced by this and tend to replicate that behavior. This also works the opposite way: speaking negatively of fathers can encourage others to feel or speak that way.²⁵ The workgroup shared these sentiments about the importance of directives and support for father engagement coming from the "top-down." When caseworkers hear messages from their supervisors and leadership about father involvement and engagement, they are more likely to invest in this as part of the case process.



Research Brief: Identifying & Locating Dads

Best Practices & Tools for Support

Although the formal process for identifying a father and establishing paternity can be resource-intensive and difficult, it is an important step in facilitating father engagement in the child welfare process, and their child/youth's life more broadly. The Center for the Study of Social Policy outlines the following recommendations to incorporate into father identification practices:²⁶

- (1) Provide training to caseworkers, supervisors, and leadership on the benefits of establishing legal paternal status and the importance of fathers' understanding their legal rights and responsibilities to their children/youth.
- (2) Develop tip sheets or practice guides with information about how caseworkers can identify fathers, including: mother questionnaires, tips for talking with mothers about father involvement,^{27,28} paternal and maternal family interviews, friends or community members, community organizations, other state and federal systems, and databases to search (see below)
- (3) Establish data-sharing agreements between child welfare, criminal justice, and education systems to identify and engage fathers involved across systems.



Fast Facts

Children who had contact with a noncustodial parent in the last year were 46% less likely to enter out-of-home care.¹⁰



Resource Spotlight

Larimer County developed guidance to assist caseworkers in the diligent search process as they look to identify and/or locate an absent parent. Scan the QR code below to visit the tool.



Conducting a Diligent Search

Several methods, tools, and databases are helpful when trying to identify and locate fathers and paternal relatives including meeting with a child's caseworker, case record review, family and child interviews and internet and data system searches.²⁹ Child Trends recommends mobility mapping and connectedness mapping as two additional practices to use in diligent searches. Mobility mapping is a more informal interviewing technique to explore child history by uncovering missing family based on discussion of their past. Connectedness mapping is a visual technique to help children visualize family members and other connections. In addition to these options, the following website and data sources can be used in working to identify and/or locate absent parents:³⁰

Co-courts (Search entire state, not just Larimer County); Accurant; Conduct Interviews (through cold calls) with other family members to secure names, addresses, phone numbers of the absent parent; Talk to past caseworker who may have worked with the family; Call supports that were identified on prior support plan; Law Enforcement check; DMV search; Facebook; Child Support.



Research Brief: Identifying & Locating Dads

Tips for Contacting Moms

One common challenge that agencies encounter in their identification, location, and contact efforts for fathers is engagement from moms. Moms may be hesitant about agencies reaching out to dads for a variety of reasons including due to safety concerns, poor relationship between co-parents, or shame and guilt. Below is a summary of practice tips for enlisting the support of moms to locate and contact fathers:^{31,32}

- (1) Listen first to the mother's concerns about contacting the father.
- (2) Explain a father's legal right to be involved in his child's life.
- (3) Explain the benefits of father involvement in a child's life.
- (4) Discuss real and perceived dangers from mom's perspective.
- (5) Utilize strengths-based and culturally-appropriate approaches in working with moms.
- (6) Explain how the information she provides will be used to help determine what is best for the child.
- (7) Explain the agency's goal of helping fathers support their child/ren in a safe, nurturing, and responsible way.
- (8) Talk through concerns a mother may have about a child being placed with the father.
- (9) Explain the outcomes for children/youth who are in foster care when their fathers are involved in the case such as: shorter stays in foster care, shorter involvement with child welfare, higher likelihood of reunification, and reduced likelihood of maltreatment in the future.
- (10) Use open-ended questions such as "tell me about the child's father."



Fast Facts

Children/youth with father involvement are at significantly less risk of poverty, infant mortality, adverse health outcomes, mental health symptoms and education disruption.¹¹

Children/youth with nonresident dads involved in their lives were less than half as likely to experience future maltreatment.¹²



Resource Spotlight

El Paso County developed a "Father Engagement Tool" for use throughout the assessment and case to help agency staff with father engagement. The tool outlines points in a case when to anticipate discussion of fathers and questions for caseworkers to reflect on in an effort to maintain father involvement in a case. Scan the QR code below to see the tool.



For more information, see the Massachusetts' Department of Children and Families "Tips for moms: Why dads who are not at home matter"³¹ and Ohio's Department of Job and Family Services, "Best Practice Guide for Engaging Fathers."³²



Research Brief: Identifying & Locating Dads

A Father Engagement Toolkit is now available to support caseworkers and their teams in successfully and effectively identifying and engaging fathers across child welfare cases. Please check out the CO Father Engagement Toolkit by visiting the 'Resource Library' tab on the CWTS website or by scanning the QR code here



SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY



Authors & Acknowledgements

Lauren Alessi, MA, lauren.alessi@colostate.edu

Casey Blackwatters, MPH, casey.blackwatters@colostate.edu

Thank you to all of our ARCH County Partners for their ongoing partnership and helpful feedback on this brief. Thanks also to the El Paso Center on Fathering for their participation in our Fatherhood Engagement Workgroup and guidance on this brief. For any questions on the ARCH Fatherhood Engagement Initiative or the Colorado State University Social Work Research Center, please email Lauren Alessi at lauren.alessi@colostate.edu.

References

Scan the QR code to access the full bibliography for this research brief



To find out more about the CSU Social Work Research Center and the ARCH Initiative, visit our website at:
<https://www.chhs.colostate.edu/swrc/>



Colorado State University | Social Work Research Center
Applied Research in Child Welfare (ARCH): Fatherhood Engagement Initiative

