

What About the Dads? Child Welfare Agencies' Efforts to Identify, Locate, and Involve Nonresident Fathers

Executive Summary

Over the past decade an interest in fathers and their contributions to family stability and children's healthy development has heightened the attention paid within the child welfare field to identifying, locating, and involving fathers. Many of the children served by child welfare agencies have nonresident fathers. In addition, the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 renewed focus on expediting permanency for children in out-of-home placement. Engaging fathers of foster children can be important not only for the potential benefit of a child-father relationship (when such a relationship does not pose a risk to the child's safety or well-being), but also for making placement decisions and gaining access to resources for the child. Permanency may be expedited by placing children with their nonresident fathers or paternal kin, or through early relinquishment or termination of the father's parental rights. Through engaging fathers, agencies may learn important medical information and/or that the child is the recipient of certain benefits, such as health insurance, survivor benefits, or child support. Apart from the father's potential as a caregiver, such resources might support a reunification goal or a relative guardianship and therefore enhance permanency options for the child.

While research is lacking on whether engaging fathers enhances the well-being or case outcomes of foster children, lack of father involvement means that caseworkers may never know whether a father can help his child. Few studies have examined nonresident fathers as placement resources for their children and there is no research about child-father visitation or research on the effects of involving nonresident fathers in the lives of children being served by child welfare agencies (Sonenstein, Malm, and Billing 2002).

The Urban Institute, with the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago, conducted the *Study of Fathers' Involvement in Permanency Planning and Child Welfare Casework* to provide the Administration for Children and Families and the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, both components within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, with a description of the extent to which child welfare agencies identify, locate, and involve nonresident fathers in case decision making and permanency planning. The study was designed to:

- examine the extent to which child welfare agencies, through policies and practices, involve nonresident fathers of foster children in casework and permanency planning;
- describe the various methods used by local agencies to identify fathers of children in foster care, establish paternity, and locate nonresident fathers;

- identify challenges to involvement, including characteristics and circumstances that may be constraints and worker opinions of nonresident fathers;
- identify practices and initiatives that may increase father involvement; and
- explore how child support agencies' information resources may assist child welfare agencies to identify and locate nonresident fathers.

The results of this study provide empirical evidence on the steps that child welfare agencies currently take to identify, locate, and involve nonresident fathers in case planning; the barriers encountered; and the policies and practices that affect involvement.

Methodology

The study was conducted in four states, Arizona, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Tennessee, using three methods of data collection—interviews with child welfare administrators, case-level data collection through interviews with caseworkers, and data linkage between child welfare and child support systems. We interviewed local agency caseworkers about particular cases between October 2004 and February 2005 to examine front-line practices related to nonresident fathers. Cases were selected from among children who had been in foster care for at least 3 months but no more than 36 months. Children in the sample were all in foster care for the first time (first placement episode), and the child welfare agency's records indicated that each of the children's biological fathers were alive but not living in the home from which the child was removed. Additionally, only one child per mother was eligible for the study.

Description of Nonresident Fathers of Foster Children

Data on 1,958 eligible cases (83% response rate) were collected through telephone interviews with 1,222 caseworkers. The nonresident fathers of the children sampled represent a varied group. While most caseworkers, at the time of the interview, knew the identity of the fathers of children in the study's sample (88%), paternity had not yet been established for over one-third of the total sample's children (37%). A comparison with mothers found that demographic characteristics of identified nonresident fathers are similar to those of the resident mothers though fathers are slightly older (36 vs. 32 years old, on average) and more likely to have been married at some point. As expected, caseworkers appear to know less about nonresident fathers. The percent of "don't know" responses is much higher for nonresident fathers than for similar questions about resident mothers.

Findings on Identifying Nonresident Fathers

Caseworkers provided detailed information on practices used to identify nonresident fathers of children in foster care. Below are findings from both the administrator and caseworker interviews include the following:

- ***Most nonresident fathers are identified early in a case.*** Caseworkers indicate that over two-thirds of nonresident fathers (68%) are identified at case opening. Many administrators reported that caseworkers begin trying to identify a child's

father during the child protection investigation. Many administrators thought efforts were stronger and more successful early in a case but after the investigation had ended. Case-level findings suggest that nonresident fathers not identified early on are less likely to have contact with the agency.

- ***Caseworkers ask a number of individuals for help in identifying the father but many do not provide information.*** For cases with fathers not identified at the time of case opening, the caseworker typically reported asking a number of different individuals—the child’s mother, mother’s relatives, other workers—for assistance in identifying the father. Only one-third of the mothers who were asked to provide information on an unidentified father did so, and other sources were not very successful either.

Findings on Locating and Contacting Nonresident Fathers

Workers also reported on how they located nonresident fathers who had been identified and circumstances that may make contacting the father difficult. Findings include the following:

- ***Caseworkers ask a number of individuals for help in locating nonresident fathers.*** Caseworkers reported asking for help from the mother, the mother’s relatives, the child, siblings, and other workers as well as the father’s relatives to help locate the nonresident father. Workers also consulted a number of other sources including law enforcement, public assistance and department of motor vehicles records, and telephone books.
- ***Few caseworkers sought the assistance of the state’s child support agency in locating the nonresident father.*** While over 60 percent of workers noted that their agency encouraged referrals to child support for help locating the father, in only 20 percent of the cases in which the father had not been located did the worker make such a referral. In 33 percent of the cases workers noted the state parent locator service was used.
- ***In slightly over half of all cases (55%), the nonresident father had been contacted by the agency or worker.*** Contact was broadly defined to include in-person contact, telephone calls, or through written or voicemail communication.
- ***Several circumstances make it hard to contact fathers.*** The most frequently reported circumstance that affected contact with the father was the father being unreachable by phone (60%); 31 percent of fathers were reported to have been incarcerated at some point in the case, although it was noted as causing difficulty with contact in only about half of these cases; and other circumstances—such as unreliable transportation, homelessness or unstable housing, and being out of the country—while cited less frequently caused greater difficulty with agency-father contact.

Findings on Father Involvement

When local child welfare administrators were asked about potential benefits and drawbacks to father involvement in child welfare cases they reported that involving fathers may benefit both the child and the father. However, administrators were quick to caution that this was true only when such involvement poses no safety risk to the child or mother. Almost three-quarters (72%) of caseworkers noted that father involvement enhances child well-being and in over 90 percent of cases in which the father was contacted the caseworkers reported sharing the case plan with the father and telling him about his child's out-of-home placement. However, only a little over half of caseworkers of children in the study sample (53%) believed nonresident fathers want to be a part of the decision-making process about their children and most reported that nonresident fathers need help with their parenting skills. Other findings include the following:

- ***Half of the contacted nonresident fathers expressed interest in having their children live with them (50% of contacted fathers or 28% of the entire sample.)***
- ***While 45 percent of the contacted fathers were considered as a placement resource, this represents only a quarter of all sampled cases.*** Caseworkers report a wide range of circumstances and problems that are likely to complicate any efforts to place the child in the home of his or her father, and some administrators seemed to favor paternal kin as a placement resource. However, administrators mentioned that even if a father cannot be a placement resource they could offer tangible benefits such as financial support or critical knowledge of the birth family's medical history.
- ***Over half of the contacted fathers (56%) had visited their child while he or she was in foster care.*** However, this represents less than one third (30%) of all fathers in the sample.

Issues Preventing Placement with Nonresident Fathers

For cases involving fathers with whom the agency had made contact, workers were asked to identify problems or issues that prevented the child from being placed with his or her father. Findings include the following:

- ***Many fathers are either substance abusers or involved in the criminal justice system.*** In over half the contacted cases (58%), workers noted fathers with drug or alcohol abuse problems and half of the fathers were involved with the criminal justice system in some way (i.e., incarcerated, on parole, or awaiting trial).
- ***Fathers are often non-compliant with services.*** Caseworkers reported offering services to fathers in over half of the cases (59%) but reported only 23 percent of the fathers had complied with the services offered.
- ***Many nonresident fathers have multiple problems.*** Workers reported that over forty percent of the contacted fathers (42%) had 4 or more of the 8 problems listed in the survey.

However, it should be noted that these are the same kinds of problems and issues that face mothers of children in foster care.

Caseworker Training on Father Involvement

While previous studies have noted a lack of training on father involvement, a significant portion of the study's caseworker respondents (70%) reported having received training on engaging fathers. At least for the four states studied here, training on fathers appears to be fairly widespread. And while few significant differences were found between male and female caseworkers or among groups of workers with differing opinions on working with fathers, several differences were found between trained and untrained caseworkers.

Findings include the following:

- *Caseworkers who received training were more likely than workers who did not receive training to report having located fathers of children in the study's sample.*
- *Significant differences were found in some of the methods used to locate fathers.* Workers who received training were more likely to seek help from the father's relatives, another worker, search public aid records, and phone books.
- *Significant differences were also found between the two groups of workers with regard to a number of father engagement type activities.* Workers reporting training were more likely than other workers to report sharing the case plan with the father and seeking financial assistance from him as part of the case plan. These workers were also more likely to report the agency considered placement with the father and that the father had expressed interest in the child living with him.

Results of Child Support Data Linkage

The linkage of cases between the child welfare and child support systems explored the potential for more extensive use of child support information by child welfare caseworkers. The results indicate that in many cases, child welfare workers do have information on paternity, location, and support that coincides with child support agency records. There were instances, however, in which child support records had information that was missing or conflicted with that recorded by child welfare workers. Given the importance of paternity establishment and the accuracy of this determination it seems prudent that child welfare workers utilize child support agencies as a means of obtaining this information and for confirming the accuracy of their own information.

Even if a child's mother or other sources provide information about a father's location, such information may be out of date or inaccurate simply because of the mobility of families and fathers. In many cases, child support administrative data systems may have more current information through either state or Federal Parent Locator Services. Recent advances in data sharing across states and on a federal level have allowed state child support systems to be a good source of information on nonresident fathers involved in child welfare cases. The data matching performed in this study indicated that on child welfare cases in which locate information through state or federal parent locator services was sought (about two-thirds of all cases in the matching sample, with some variation

across states), these methods were successful in providing location information in 96 percent of cases. Information on official child support orders and collection on orders would also be beneficial to child welfare caseworkers as part of an overall assessment of the nonresident father as a placement resource for his child.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

This study is an exploratory look at nonresident fathers of children in the child welfare system. The findings provide a description of nonresident fathers of children in foster care from the perspective of caseworkers and administrators, what nonresident fathers can or cannot provide to their children, and where they fit within families served by child welfare agencies is the foundation of casework practice.

While the study findings do not define best practices, they can inform practice. Some practice areas that agencies should examine include the following:

- ***Search for nonresident fathers early in the case.*** Gathering information about a nonresident father's identity as part of case investigation or other assessment activities appears to be effective since a majority of the fathers had been identified early in the case. Agencies should consider whether information about fathers is being sought consistently at (or before) the time a child is first placed in foster care.
- ***Provide guidance and training to caseworkers on identifying, locating, and involving fathers.*** Caseworker practice related to nonresident fathers appears case specific and variable. Agencies should make clear what steps caseworkers should consider when mothers do not know or share information about the child's father. Caseworker training appears to help caseworkers understand the importance of father involvement and facilitates consideration of a father placement option. Specialization of work with fathers may be worth exploring. A number of administrators reported that specialization proved helpful to their agencies, particularly with regard to seeking the location of missing fathers.
- ***Agencies may need to examine whether services offered to fathers are designed to engage fathers.*** The study found a small percent of nonresident fathers, when offered services, complied with all the services offered. Further attention may need to be focused on how caseworkers present service options to nonresident fathers and how societal expectations play a role in these interactions.
- ***Address domestic violence and worker safety concerns.*** Caseworkers and administrators expressed a reluctance to involve some fathers because doing so might reintroduce potential abusers into volatile family situations. Administrators also raised concerns regarding worker safety when contacting the fathers of children on the caseload. Unless safety concerns are effectively addressed, both those related to worker safety as well as those related to the safety of the child and mother, efforts to involve fathers are likely to stall. Safety concerns need to be acknowledged and assessed at a case level and, as previously noted, through

training. However, that nearly half of the fathers were never contacted by the agency suggests that little assessment of the actual risk presented is occurring.

- ***Use child support data more consistently.*** Child support information, including father location, paternity, and financial support, can be a helpful tool in considering placements with fathers or other ways in which fathers can play a constructive role in their children's lives.
- ***Develop models for involving fathers constructively.*** Unless the child has a case plan goal of placement with his/her father or his kin, caseworkers often are not sure what, if anything, they should be doing beyond sharing the child's case plan or offering visitation. There is considerable room for programming that engages nonresident fathers on behalf of their children in ways that could extend beyond the child's stay in foster care and supports the child's best interests.

This study also serves as a starting point for further research. For example, using the same dataset, more detailed state-specific analyses would be helpful in examining how different policies affect casework practice toward nonresident fathers. State and local characteristics (e.g., rural/urban, poverty measures) could be added to the dataset and used in a variety of analyses to examine state and local practice differences. The regression models could be modified to include a different set of independent variables. While not a large sample, children who have a goal of placement with their father could be examined. Case outcomes could be examined for children reunified with mother and children placed with fathers.

Additionally, other research could include efforts to collect qualitative data to examine the relationship between permanency goals and casework, specifically casework involving fathers. Qualitative research could also examine specific methods of identifying, locating and involving fathers. Further examination of training opportunities for caseworkers and the impact on practice directed at nonresident fathers is also suggested.