

info sheet 15



Child Protection Workers: Engaging Fathers

1. IDENTIFY AND LOCATE: The earlier the caseworker identifies the father, the greater the chance the worker will locate and contact the father.

- According to the *What About the Dads* study, approximately 2/3 of nonresident fathers are identified at case opening and 88% were identified during the case.
- But only 1/3 of mothers who were asked to provide information on the unidentified father did so, and few caseworkers sought the assistance of the state's child support agency in locating the father.
- Once identified, only about 55% of the fathers were contacted (reasons included: father unreachable by phone; father incarcerated at some point in the case; father had unreliable transportation; homelessness or unstable housing). Other research indicates the need to go beyond traditional methods (mail) of contacting and engaging fathers.

2. INVOLVE: Identify the barriers to overcome in involving fathers in case-planning and placement. ¹

Caseworker and systemic bias:

- Only a little over half of the caseworkers involved in the *What About the Dads* study believed nonresident fathers want to be a part of the decision-making process about their children, but 50% of contacted fathers expressed interest in having their children live with them.
- Many workers never have had any training on the importance and benefits to children of father involvement or on how to engage fathers. Findings from a study in New York City (2001) suggest that fathers had to demonstrate to the caseworker their connection to the child whereas the mothers' connection to the child was taken for granted by the caseworkers. ²
- Workers are overburdened and locating and involving fathers can fall low on the priority list. Additionally, many agencies lack clear guidelines for how to involve fathers. Caseworkers are unsure of what to put into

a case plan, beyond visitation. Workers are sometimes afraid of their own safety or that of mothers in contacting fathers, but often the risk is not assessed.

Mothers' gate keeping:

- Mothers are often the gatekeepers to locating and involving fathers. They may fail to identify the father when he is known or downplay the importance of the father in the child's life. They also may be concerned about his contact with the law if he is behind on child support payments, is an undocumented immigrant, or has outstanding arrest warrants.

Nonresident fathers' characteristics and circumstances:

- Lack of paternity establishment by the father is often cited as a barrier, although in Minnesota, a child can be placed with a

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What About the Dads?

Unless otherwise indicated, all research findings are from the 2006 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services study, *What About the Dads? Child Welfare Agencies' Efforts to Identify, Locate, and Involve Nonresident Fathers*. This study was conducted by the Urban Institute with the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. Information was based on interviews with child welfare administrators and case workers in 4 states, Arizona, Massachusetts, Minnesota and Tennessee, and data collection from these cases. They looked only at cases in which children were in foster care for the first time, in care at least 3 months but no more than 36 months, and where the children's biological father was alive but not living in the home from which the child was removed.

Research on child welfare agencies' efforts to identify, locate and involve nonresident fathers

Our mission

The Minnesota Fathers & Families Network enhances healthy father-child relationships by promoting initiatives that inform public policy and further develop the field of fatherhood practitioners statewide.

August 2008

Minnesota Fathers & Families Network
(763) 473-7432
info@mnfathers.org
www.mnfathers.org

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father whose paternity has not been established, provided it is part of his case plan. Fear of getting a child support order may keep some fathers away, particularly unemployed fathers.

- Substance abuse or involvement in the criminal justice system was prevalent in over half (58%) of the fathers contacted in the *What About the Dads* study and many fathers had multiple problems preventing placement. In many cases, however, noncustodial fathers are not eligible for the same services as mothers, such as housing and employment assistance.
- Multiple partner fertility, when the mother or father has children by other people, complicates father involvement and casework.
- Non-compliance is an issue – caseworkers in the *What About the Dads* study reported offering services to fathers in over half of the cases (59%) but reported only 23 percent of fathers complied with services offered. Other research has suggested that caseworkers' communication may impede effective relationships with fathers, that fathers may fail to adequately understand the consequences of failure to comply with services, and that services being provided to fathers may not be set up to meet their needs.

3. TRAIN: Training matters! While few significant differences were found in the *What About the Dads* study between male and female caseworkers or among groups of workers with differing opinions on working with fathers, there were several differences between trained and untrained

caseworkers. Those trained on engaging fathers were:

- More likely to report having located fathers and more likely to seek help from a variety of methods to locate the father (the father's relatives, another worker, public aid records, and phone books),
- More likely to report sharing the case plan with the father, and
- More likely to report the agency considered placement with the father and that the father had expressed an interest in the child living with him.

4. EVALUATE: Follow-up research – *More about the Dads, Exploring Associations Between Nonresident Father Involvement and Child Welfare Case Outcomes*³ – found that nonresident father involvement is associated with positive outcomes:

- Nonresident fathers' involvement with their children is associated with a higher likelihood of a reunification outcome and a lower likelihood of an adoption outcome.
- Children with highly involved nonresident fathers (defined as visiting child at least once a week, and providing financial and non-financial support for the child) are discharged from foster care more quickly than those with less or no involvement.
- Among children whose case outcome is reunification, usually with their mothers, higher levels of nonresident father involvement are associated with a substantially lower likelihood of subsequent maltreatment allegations.

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This brief identifies some common issues related to working with fathers, but isn't intended as a best practices guide.

¹ In 2005, the Minnesota Department of Human Services issued a PIP (Project Improvement Plan) TIPS on Involving Fathers. In 2008, DHS began work on a new Project Improvement Plan for engaging and involving fathers in child welfare practice.

² E.J. Franck, "Outreach to Birthfathers of Children in Out-of-Home Care," *Child Welfare* 80(3): 381-399 (2001).

³ The "What About the Dads?" study (2006) and the "More About the Dads" study (2008) are available at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/O6/CW-involve-dads/> and <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/O8/MoreAboutDads/index.htm>.

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