

# A Guide for Father Involvement in Systems of Care

**TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PARTNERSHIP**  
for Child and Family Mental Health



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# Introduction

“Of all the rocks upon which we build our lives, we are reminded today that family is the most important. And we are called to recognize and honor how critical every father is to that foundation. They are teachers and coaches. They are mentors and role models. They are examples of success and the men who constantly push us toward it.”

— Barack Obama<sup>1</sup>, Father’s Day Speech, Chicago, Illinois, June 15, 2008

FATHERS ARE IMPORTANT. Over the course of time, we have learned more about the essential roles of both mothers *and* fathers in the healthy development of their children. Contemporary studies consistently show that children with involved, loving fathers are much more likely to do well in school; have healthy self-esteem; exhibit empathy and pro-social behavior; and avoid high-risk behaviors such as drug use, truancy, and delinquent activity, than children who have uninvolved fathers (Horn & Sylvester, 2002, p. 15).

Often, however, child-serving systems seem to discount the importance of fathers’ involvement. They often seem to treat payment of child support as the fathers’ only critical responsibility to their children. Financial support *is* important, but data show that outcomes for children will improve not by virtue of financial support alone, but also through high-quality interactions between fathers and their children. Despite popular opinion, most non-custodial fathers *do* pay child support; and when they do not, most often it is due to an inability—not an unwillingness—to pay (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1992).

In the behavioral health field, sometimes we assume that fathers (and especially fathers of color) *don’t care* when they are not present at their children’s appointments. As a group, fathers *are* less likely to attend meetings than mothers. A father who is absent from an appointment, however, is often assumed to be an “absent father,” while similar judgment is rarely expressed about a mother in the same circumstance. In fact, most fathers are *not* absent fathers. Both systemic and historical factors help us to understand why fathers may sometimes be—or appear to be—less involved in the lives of their children than mothers are.

This guide shares information about the importance of fathers in the lives of their children, and it identifies potential consequences if they are *not* involved. It also offers strategies for systems and families, especially those who are involved in systems of care, to help fathers *become* more involved.

Section I discusses statistics about the presence and absence of fathers in families. Section II describes effects of fathers’ absence or presence in the lives of their children and explains why children need an active father in their lives. Section III outlines ways in which systems of care can best support the involvement of fathers in individual and family service plans. Section IV explains how systems of care can involve fathers in all core dimensions of development (including family-driven, youth-guided services/supports, cultural and linguistic competence, clinical services and structure, governance, social marketing, evaluation, logic

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<sup>1</sup> Then-candidate Barack Obama’s full 24-minute address can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hj1hCDjwG6M>

model development, strategic planning, the technical assistance plan, and continuous quality improvement). Section V discusses three different cultural perspectives of fatherhood. Section VI focuses on the important role of *young* fathers in the growth and development of their children. Section VII, recognizing the increasing number of grandparents raising grandchildren, considers how best to involve grandfathers; and Section VIII explores the important role of fathers in the child welfare system. The Guide concludes in Section IX with a collection of national, state, and other resources, gathered to help readers learn more about the critical role of fathers in the lives of their children.

**Authors' Note:** *The Technical Assistance Partnership for Child and Family Mental Health's (TA Partnership) "A Guide for Father Involvement in Systems of Care" is a work in progress. Since launching our Fatherhood Learning Community in the spring of 2009, we have been continuously impressed by the commitment of communities around the country to enhance efforts to apply the gifts of fathers and male caregivers to the development and improvement of their systems of care. We would like to acknowledge the early contributions of our community partners to this Guide, including Robert Clanaġan, LaRone Greer, Kurt Moore, and Esteban Zubia. The TA Partnership welcomes your suggestions in continuing to build this body of expertise and invites you to check back periodically for updates and additions to this developing work. To comment or suggest additional material, please contact Ken Martinez, Psy.D., at [kmartinez@air.org](mailto:kmartinez@air.org).*

## Section I: Where Are the Dads?



Fathers who live with their children are more likely to have close, enduring relationships with their children than those who do not. For many decades, however, the stability of family relationships within which children are raised has significantly eroded. The following statistics from the National Fatherhood Initiative's *Father Facts* (Horn & Sylvester, 2002) sketch a profile of the changing demographics of American families in which today's children are developing:

- Forty-three percent of first marriages dissolve within 15 years, and approximately 60 percent of divorcing couples have children. Roughly one million children each year experience the divorces of their parents.
- Nearly 20 million American children (27 percent) live in single-parent homes. Eighteen percent of the single parents who currently live with their children are men, while 82 percent are women. (Of the single parents who are fathers, 8 percent are raising *three or more* children under 18 years of age.)
- The number of single fathers in the U.S.—now 2.5 million—has increased more than six-fold from 400,000 in 1970.
  - Forty-two percent of single fathers are divorced, 38 percent have never married, 16 percent are separated, and 4 percent are widowed.
  - Seventy-three percent have an annual family income of \$50,000 or less.
- Compared to children born to married parents, children born to cohabiting parents are three times as likely to experience eventual father absence; and children born to unmarried, *non*-cohabiting parents are four times as likely to live in a father-absent home.
- From 1995 to 2000, the proportion of children living in single-parent homes slightly declined, while the proportion of children living with two married parents remained stable.
- Still, 24 million children (34 percent) today do not live with their biological fathers.
  - Approximately 26 percent of absent fathers live in a different state than their children.
  - Approximately 40 percent of children in father-absent homes have not seen their fathers even once during the past year.
  - Approximately 50 percent of children not living with their fathers have never set foot in their fathers' homes.

“*It is easier for a father to have children than for children to have a real father.*”

– Pope John XXIII

## Section II: How Does a Father’s Presence or Absence Affect His Children?



The presence and active involvement of a father makes his children more likely to do well in school, have healthy self-esteem, exhibit pro-social behavior, and avoid high-risk behaviors, compared with children who are raised without a father (Dare To Be King – Urban Leadership Institute, 2006).

Conversely, boys and young men growing up without a father face enormous risks compared with males who are raised with their fathers. The following statistics from the Urban Leadership Institute's

*Dare To Be King curriculum* (2006) document those risks for children and youth.

| Children/Youth from Fatherless Homes                 | Children/Youth from Homes with Fathers               |
|--|--|
| 63 percent of youth suicides                         | 37 percent of youth suicides                         |
| 90 percent of homeless and runaway youth             | 10 percent of homeless and runaway youth             |
| 85 percent of youth who exhibit behavioral disorders | 15 percent of youth who exhibit behavioral disorders |
| 71 percent of all high school dropouts               | 29 percent of all high school dropouts               |
| 75 percent of all youth in chemical abuse centers    | 25 percent of all youth in chemical abuse centers    |
| 70 percent of youth in state-operated institutions   | 30 percent of youth in state-operated institutions   |

What accounts for these differences between fatherless homes and homes with fathers? Dr. Stephen D. Green’s research focuses on the dynamics between fathers and their children and provides the following reasons why children need active fathers (Green, 2000):

### 20 Reasons Why Your Child Needs You to be an Active Father

1. **“Lets your child know that you love her.** Love involves more than saying the words ‘I love you.’ Fathers who love their children demonstrate their love by spending quality and quantity time together. Children who feel loved are more likely to develop a strong emotional bonds with their father and develop healthy self-esteem.”
2. **“Provides your child with greater financial resources.** Research indicates that families with an active father are ‘better off’ financially. This means that children with active fathers will be more likely to have access to resources that facilitate healthy development (e.g., food, clothing, shelter, quality medical care).”

3. **“Provides your child with a positive male role model.** Children, regardless of gender, need positive male and female role models. Children tend to model behavior (positive and negative) that they witness on a consistent basis. Active fathers can promote positive behaviors by setting a proper example for their children.”
4. **“Provides your child with emotional support.** In addition to financial support, children also need emotional support from their parents. Active fathers listen and support their children when they experience joy, sadness, anger, fear, and frustration. Fathers who support their children emotionally tend to raise children who are more in-tune with the needs of others.”
5. **“Enhances your child’s self-esteem.** Self-esteem refers to how a person feels about himself. Children with high self-esteem tend to be happier and more confident than children with low self-esteem. Active fathers promote their children’s self-esteem by being fully involved in their lives and letting them know that they are highly valued.”
6. **“Enhances your child’s intellectual development.** Children who are raised with actively involved fathers tend to score higher on measures of verbal and mathematical ability and also demonstrate greater problem-solving and social skills.”
7. **“Provides your child with guidance and discipline.** From infancy, children need proper guidance and discipline. Active fathers play an important role in teaching their children proper behavior by setting and enforcing healthy limits.”
8. **“Gives your child someone to play with.** One of the primary ways that fathers bond with their children is through play. According to researchers, there are differences in the ways fathers and mothers play with their children. Fathers tend to use a more physical style of play (e.g., wrestling) that offers a number of benefits to children, including enhanced cognitive ability.”
9. **“Provides your child with someone to talk to when she has questions.** Young children are full of questions. This natural curiosity helps them learn about their environment. Active fathers can be a valuable source of information for children who are seeking answers to life’s important questions.”
10. **“Increases your child’s chances for academic success.** Children whose fathers are actively involved in their lives are more likely to achieve academic success than children whose fathers are not actively involved. These academic benefits appear to extend into adulthood.”
11. **“Provides your child with an alternative perspective on life.** Research indicates that men and women often differ in their parenting styles; however, one style is not necessarily better than the other. Instead, it can be healthy for children to be exposed to different perspectives on life, such as a father’s.”
12. **“Lowers your child’s chances for early sexual activity.** Children with actively involved fathers are less likely to engage in early sexual activity, thus reducing their chances for teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.”
13. **“Lowers your child’s chances for school failure.** Children with actively involved fathers are less likely to drop out of school than children with uninvolved fathers.”

- 14. “Lowers your child’s chances for youth suicide.** Children with actively involved fathers are less likely to commit suicide than children with uninvolved fathers.”
- 15. “Lowers your child’s chances for juvenile delinquency.** The benefits of having an active father throughout a child’s early years extend into the teen years as well. Children with active fathers are less likely to commit juvenile crimes than children with inactive fathers.”
- 16. “Lowers your child’s chances for adult criminality.** The chances that a child will commit crimes as an adult also diminish when he grows up with an actively involved father.”
- 17. “Provides your child with a sense of physical and emotional security.** One of the major benefits that fathers can provide to their children by being actively involved is a sense of security (physical and emotional). By being actively involved in a child’s life, a father promotes a trusting relationship. The child does not have to worry about being abandoned.”
- 18. “Facilitates your child’s moral development.** Children need a moral compass to guide them when they face difficult moral choices. Fathers, like mothers, help children to develop a sense of right and wrong that serves as a foundation for establishing moral character.”
- 19. “Promotes a healthy gender identity in your child.** Boys and girls benefit from having healthy role models from both sexes. Research points to the fact that mothers and fathers socialize their children in different ways. Fathers can help their children, especially boys, to develop a healthy sense of what it means to be a male.”
- 20. “Helps your child learn important life skills.** Most of the essential life skills that children need to survive are learned within the home. Fathers have a unique opportunity to teach their children valuable skills that will enable them to grow up to be healthy and productive adults.”

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From *20 Reasons Why Your Child Needs You to Be an Active Father*, by S. D. Green (2000).

## Section III: Why Is Inclusion of Fathers Important in Systems of Care?



Fathers are an integral part of their families and communities. They are part of the solutions needed to address challenges. While sometimes not valued as much as they deserve to be, fathers bring a rich perspective to systems that have historically focused primarily on mothers or female caregivers.

When fathers are involved in their children's lives, the children they care for enter formal systems less frequently, less deeply, and for shorter periods of time. Because the majority of enrolled children in systems of care are male, inclusion of male caregivers in systems of care is especially critical. Building systems of care is hard work, and we need *everyone* involved.

### **How Can Systems of Care Best Support the Involvement of Fathers in Individual and Family Service Plans?**

Over time, system of care communities have learned and shared successful strategies about working with fathers and male caregivers. Strategies have been identified at both the individual (child, family) level, as well as at the system level. (System-level strategies will be described in Section IV.)

#### **The Individual Planning Team Should...**

- Ensure that fathers have access, voice, and choice in the development, implementation, and revision of service plans.
- Make a conscious effort to recognize and understand the cultural implications of being a male caregiver.
- Be in the habit of asking caregivers, “Will Dad be a part of the meeting?” When setting appointments, ask the mother, “Can Dad be sent an invitation if he is not part of the household?”
- Make efforts to understand fathers’ work schedules, and try to schedule meetings at times that are convenient for fathers.
- Ensure that professionals speak *with* and *to* fathers (eye-to-eye contact)—not *about* or *over* them in ways that can serve to exclude and eventually alienate them.
- Engage Dad by asking for his opinion/insight if he is not saying anything during a meeting.
- Seek fathers’ input/ideas/concerns in advance of meetings that they are unable to attend.
- Follow up with fathers when they must be absent from meetings (e.g., due to work, immigration status, military service, incarceration status) to ensure they understand what has been discussed; to elicit their input, feedback, and suggestions; and to incorporate their ideas into their children’s plans. Work with the custodial mother or legal guardian to include the father even when he is not the custodial parent or legal guardian, within the parameters the court sets forth during the process of divorce and after the divorce is final.

- Ensure that service plans are culturally and linguistically competent. They should meet the diverse needs of fathers by ensuring that cultural preferences, practices, and mores are learned, understood, and honored.
- Make every effort to discover fathers' strengths, needs, and key cultural considerations that are relevant to addressing the needs of their children in order to develop truly effective individualized plans.

“ *My father didn't tell me how to live; he lived, and let me watch him do it.* ”

– Clarence B. Kelland

## Section IV: Systems of Care Should Infuse Fathers' Involvement in All Core Dimensions



Earnest efforts in dozens of communities are aiming to attract and optimize the many valuable contributions that fathers can bring to the development and refinement of systems of care in which their children with mental health and related challenges can succeed and thrive. During the past two years the authors' conversations with many at the forefront of those community efforts have yielded a lengthy list of suggestions and recommendations about infusing father's involvement. We hope many of these strategies can help *your* community to attract the positive "power of dads" to key dimensions of system development and implementation including family-driven, youth-guided services/supports, cultural and linguistic competence, clinical services and structure, governance, social marketing, evaluation, logic model development, strategic planning, the technical assistance plan, and continuous quality improvement.

### ORGANIZATIONAL

- Ensure that you hire those who embrace the power of positive contributions and participation by fathers when recruiting individuals for influential and decision-making positions within your system of care or organization.
- Understand and respect men in our society. Provide training to staff on the "culture of fathers" (innate characteristics and socialization of men), which is different from the culture of mothers.
- Link with local, state, and national fatherhood initiatives to share information and develop partnerships that are mutually beneficial.
- Find out what fathers need and want to be actively involved in the lives of their children that may be particular to your specific population of focus, system of care, cultural group, geographic region, and community; make accommodations to meet their needs and requests.
- Create father-friendly programs that focus specifically on fathers. Make sure initiatives are welcoming and engaging to males.
- Ensure that all forms (registration, intake, evaluation) used for interviews, screenings, clinical assessments and evaluations, service and supports, system evaluation (methodology, data fields chosen, analysis of data), surveys, and literature speak about and include fathers in the information and interventions.

### OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT

- Be creative with outreach and recruitment efforts. Go where the fathers are (e.g., houses of worship, barbershops, cultural gatherings). Recognize that male-to-male outreach, engagement, and partnering is critical for success.
- Individualize outreach to, and engagement with, fathers (effective methods often differ from those for mothers), using methods that appeal to fathers, including gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning fathers, and provide opportunities that involve more doing than talking.
- Provide leadership in engagement from within the system of care, by actively seeking out fathers of the children involved in the system(s) through individual phone calls, home visits, and face-to-face relationship building.

- Focus outreach and other social marketing efforts on reaching fathers in ways that are inviting and non-judgmental and that promote their unique world view and focus on de-stigmatizing their involvement.
- Send Dad invitations to meetings/activities if he is not in the household.
- Acknowledge and respect fathers' input, perspectives, and communication styles, although these may be different from those of mothers. Fathers have feelings.

## PROGRAMMING AND TRAINING

- Focus on action so men don't feel threatened by having to talk about their concerns, especially at the beginning. Males typically prioritize fixing problems over talking about them.
- Develop father- and child-centered activities, such as sporting activities, camping, video games, etc.
- Arrange opportunities for fathers to lead projects for which they can recruit other males.
- Collaborate with other existing community activities that focus on fathers, so that fathers can become, or can remain, connected to their own communities and influence the direction and focus of other programs to be father friendly.
- Provide training focused on the social-emotional development of children, on practical parenting skills, and on the essential contributions of fathers to their children's development. This training is as important for mothers as it is for fathers.
- Develop and provide training/coaching/mentoring geared specifically for fathers, by fathers, including unique populations such as teen fathers or fathers who are gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning. Identify/create opportunities to encourage fathers' mentoring of children.
- Ensure the inclusion and participation of fathers in family support groups and family leadership teams.
- Look for father groups/organizations that fathers in your community can be directed to that may help them with their needs as males and/or dads, whether your site has a fathers' group or not.
- Make purposeful efforts to retain and challenge fathers and male caregivers in positive ways. Retention is imperative!
- Ensure that children of gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals and individuals questioning their sexual identity know that they and their families are supported. They are fathers, too. Sexual identity is not determined by whether one fathers a child. This is an especially vulnerable population that may be forcibly alienated from their children. Create environments that are welcoming and inclusive.
- Always let fathers know that they are not alone; that they are valued; that they will be supported through various means, including peer mentoring, support groups, and specialized or focused training; and that they will always be treated with respect.

## Section V: Fatherhood and Culture



While “ethnic families and fathers do not deviate much from Anglo-American families and fathers, they still should not be judged by white middle-class standards. Ethnic minority families are diverse, and there is no single monolithic ethnic family structure among or within them. Internal variation within major ethnic groups prohibits generalization” (Fatherhood, 2003).

New generations of fathers, including those from different ethnic/racial groups, are engaging in a “new fathering” paradigm that takes the best from what they were taught and combines it with what they strive to be as fathers, so that they develop a style that is comfortable and “generative” for their children and future generations.

“*Fatherhood is pretending the present you love most is “soap-on-a-rope.”*”

– Bill Cosby

### HISPANIC/LATINO FATHERHOOD

Hispanic/Latino men, as with other men of color, are frequently and incorrectly stereotyped. They are portrayed as being authoritarian, distant, not emotionally connected, averse to family intimacy, and *machista* husbands and fathers. Contrary to popular myth, Hispanic/Latino fathers do not conform to stereotypes or media portrayals. There is growing evidence that deficit models to describe fathers of color do not accurately describe the care they feel and show for their children (Fitzpatrick, Caldera, Pursley, & Wampler, 1999; Toth & Xu, 1999).

A recent study found that “a transformation is taking place among Latino fathers on both sides of the border. Many fathers exhibit contemporary views and feelings that reflect the trend of ‘new fathering.’ They are redefining machismo through their attitudes and fathering practices. Although many fathers on both sides of the border are involved and aware of their children’s needs and aspirations, to those on the outside these fathers may still show signs of traditionality” (Taylor & Behnke, 2005, p. 14). The report notes that the Latino men in this study were “profoundly affected by their relationships with their fathers, who ranged from involved dads to absent dads” (p. 11). This is similar to other findings that fathers’ own fathers’ models of parenting, whether positive or negative, influenced how they interacted with their children (Daly, 1995).

Taylor and Behnke also state that the most prominent value that Latino fathers want to transmit to the next generation is the importance of a good education; they also want to instill a strong work ethic in their children. The fathers want to see their children in better jobs but, at the same time, don’t want them to lose the satisfaction of working hard. The authors conclude that their findings support the idea of “generative fathering” (meeting the needs of the next generation instead of current societal expectations [Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997]) to describe the resiliency of Latino fathers and the contributions they make to families, communities, and future generations.

Although many Latino fathers are significantly affected by poverty and economic hardship, they have strong family values and belong to tight-knit communities that increase their resiliency (Vega et al., 1986). Latino fathers are complex individuals with family values that facilitate their involvement in the lives of their families (Coltrane, Parke, & Adams, 2004). These studies seem to indicate that Hispanic/Latino fathers defy the stereotypes ascribed to them and instead define their own style of parenting that combines the best of what they learned from their fathers and their own styles of what they think is right.

## AFRICAN-AMERICAN FATHERHOOD

African-American fathers are often characterized as absent, violent, and uninvolved in their children's lives. "Policy discussions, while they do not always identify African-American males as a source of the problem, repeatedly suggest that African-American males are inherently irresponsible, erratic in behavior and unable to assume the responsibility of employment or fatherhood" (Gadsden & Smith, 1994, p. 634).

Father absence in most western cultures does have a significant impact on children, including higher rates of violence, substance abuse, gang-related activities, poorer school performance, higher dropout rates, and lower occupational attainment. Many societal factors serve as barriers and affect fathers' involvement, including education and economic and legal issues.

Contrary to the false negative descriptions characterizing African-American males, Yeung et al.'s research indicates that "African-American fathers are neither absent nor uninvolved in family life, but play essential roles within families" (as cited in *Fatherhood*, 2003). They emphasize "family unity, stability, and adaptability. Middle-class African-American fathers are involved in the rearing of their children; maintain warm, interpersonal relations with them; and their children are well-adjusted and motivated" (as cited in *Fatherhood*, 2003).

White and Connor (2007) state that "traditional definitions of fatherhood underestimate the role of black fathers and do not adequately capture the cultural nuances that surround the fathering role in the African-American experience." "Social fatherhood" is a term used by Rebekah Coley (2001) and others that encapsulates the role of the community in raising a child, including the biological father and others. The term includes men who assume some or all of the roles fathers are expected to perform in a child's life, regardless of whether or not they are biological fathers. These social fathers provide a significant degree of nurturance, moral and ethical guidance, companionship, emotional support, and financial responsibility in the lives of children.

When all in the community, including fathers, take responsibility for the care of their children, the likelihood of success is greater. African-American fathers can and do play important roles in their children's lives, especially when there are educational and employment opportunities for them.

## NATIVE AMERICAN FATHERHOOD

Advising Native American men from a strength-based approach, Pooley (2010) reminds them that “fatherhood is leadership—the most important kind of leadership in the entire world...The father’s primary job is to bring happiness and safety to his family...You lead your family with kindness, dignity and humility.” His message is that fathers are not sick or bad, but that some fathers have been “misled, misguided, misdirected, and misinformed.” Therefore fathers (and mothers) need to be forward-thinking, feeling, and acting people.

Pooley refers to the historical trauma that is a real part of Native peoples’ history and psyche. He says that sometimes those who teach this history are affected by historical trauma and are left only with anger, which can be destructive. The teaching of historical trauma should inspire people to do better, especially in future generations.

Spirituality is important in being and in fathering. To Pooley, “greatness is not in the person. Greatness comes from the Creator and flows through a person...The Creator is who men can ask for guidance and direction...Two of the most sacred things on earth are fatherhood and motherhood...Families are the most important institution. Our other institutions must all exist to support the institution of the family.”

Native American fatherhood has always been important, but the stresses of western society have “misguided” Native American fathers. The task, according to Pooley, is not to preach to fathers about their wrongs, because they know these already, but to uplift and encourage them, strengthen their existing hope, and inspire and assist them. Only then will they be ready to listen so that they can learn.

“*Native men make great husbands, make great fathers and make great leaders...You came from greatness. Now as a father it is your responsibility to lead your family back to the greatness from which you came.*”

– Al Pooley, President of the Native American Fatherhood and Families Association

## Section VI: Young Fathers



Father involvement is vital to the health of a quality system of care community, and this value is not lost in reference to young fathers. Young teenage and transition-aged (those ages 17 to 25) fathers do, however, require strategic and thoughtful approaches to engagement, not only because of their age but because of various limitations associated with their age (Schwartz, 1999). For example, fatherhood is commonly associated with the ability to financially provide for the child and the mother. There are often limited employment opportunities and strict employment laws for hiring individuals under the age of 18.

When seeking the involvement of this population, it is important to recognize the differences between the two main subgroups: (1) youth who are receiving services and who are fathers, (2) fathers of children receiving services who are young adults.

These two groups may require different methods of engagement and expect different levels of support for their engagement. Many approaches used for engaging youth in both groupings may be similar but have subtle differences.

Communities also need to recognize that young fathers come from various socio-economic, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. In addition, their age impacts interactions with the system. Promising and model programs for young fathers often have a component focusing on relationships between the youth and program staff, peers, and/or mentors.

Research suggests, and practice confirms, that one major element of a successful young fatherhood program is the presence of a one-on-one relationship between the young father and program staff (Bronte-Tinkew, Burkhauser, & Metz, 2008). This relationship building must include the teen, staff, and partners. It is also critical to explore the relationship between the young father and the mother and consider her role in the relationship-building process as well. Building a relationship shows teen fathers that the system can be compassionate and committed to them and their families.

Although relationship-building is important to young fathers, other issues may become more pressing in their lives, and, if not addressed, may ultimately prevent young fathers from becoming involved or maintaining their involvement. When engaging young fathers, be sure that you listen to the needs that they express, and be sure to develop opportunities for these youth to fill their needs. In some cases, the need is as simple as providing a platform for having their voices heard and their struggles identified. For others, there may be more pressing needs related to housing, food, and employment. Quality involvement tactics will benefit the youth as a father and as a person through his participation.

Think about building tailored training and employment opportunities into your engagement practices that emphasize youth and fatherhood. More specific needs will arise if young fathers are involved in helping develop the engagement programs with the program organizers.

## MORE INFORMATION AND TIPS ABOUT YOUNG FATHERS

### **Keep in mind that young fathers:**

- *Want* to be good parents.
- Can be good parents, with appropriate supports.
- Are still adolescents developmentally, although they are parents.
- Have adult parenting needs.

### **Consider these programmatic tips:**

- Change language in all written documents from “teen parents” to “young mothers and fathers.”
- Send a letter of engagement directly to the fathers rather than, or in addition to, their parents/caregivers.
- Provide childcare for events designed for youth who are not parents to encourage young mothers and fathers to participate.
- Encourage gatherings of young fathers to foster father/child play time.
- Place father- and youth-friendly messages, pictures, and reading materials in your lobby, mailings, and promotional materials.
- Consider ways to encourage the parents/caregivers of young fathers to become engaged as mentors and coaches rather than “parents.” Young fathers may have legal needs related to custody of their children, in addition to seeking their own independence. Consider provisions for helping them to understand and navigate the judicial system.

## SECTION VII: Grandfathers



Grandfathers are critical to the lives of grandchildren, serving as supports and mentors. In addition, over recent years, they have increasingly become primary caregivers. AARP (formerly known as the American Association of Retired Persons) notes that 31 percent of the U.S. population is grandparents. Of that group, 8 percent provides consistent childcare for their grandchildren. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 6.3 percent, or 4.5 million children/youth under the age of 18, lived in grandparent-headed households. More than one-third of these youth had no interaction with their biological parents. It is estimated that this number has increased over the last decade (Mader, 2008).

Considering this information, it is important to engage grandfathers in systems of care. It is necessary to understand that, similar to teen fathers, grandfathers have unique needs associated with their age. When working with this population, it is critical that we understand and address these needs. Grandparents often rely on Medicare and Social Security, and they often have physical and mental health needs associated with aging and older adults. For many child-serving systems, there is limited knowledge, access, information, and expertise related to serving older adults. To achieve authentic engagement, system of care communities may need to consider building relationships with older adult serving systems and supports as a way of being responsive, respectful, and engaging. Additionally, considering the societal role of fathers as financial supporters of the family, grandfathers may struggle because they are retired, unable to work, or lack availability of gainful employment.

### **Consider the following tips:**

- Create parenting opportunities, activities, and supports for grandfathers. Typically, grandparents seek support from other grandparents before seeking the assistance of traditional parents.
- Diversify staff, partners, and volunteers to reflect older adults and grandparents.
- Partner with the adult mental health and social service systems.
- Provide mentoring, skill-building, and information specifically identified for grandparents. Often, grandparents have not parented a child for a long time and now need to re-acclimate themselves to current supports and services.
- Be cautious of your language and mannerisms. Grandfathers are capable of being viable and good parents.
- Recognize the strengths, wisdom, and experience grandfathers bring to the parenting experience. They possess “lessons learned” and a unique perspective on their families and communities.
- Include grandparent-friendly language, pictures, and signs in your literature and office settings.
- Understand that grandfathers may have legal needs related to guardianship that may either promote or challenge their engagement.

## SECTION VIII: Fathers in Families with Child Welfare System Involvement



Families come to the attention of the child welfare system to prevent the abuse or neglect of children, protect children from abuse or neglect, and/or find permanent families for those who cannot safely return to their families. Fathers can play a critical role in strengthening families to successfully care for their children, ensure their safety, and foster their well being.

A study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *What About the Dads? Child Welfare Agencies' Efforts to Identify, Locate and Involve Non-Resident Fathers*, found only limited involvement of fathers in many child welfare cases (Malm, Murray, & Geen, 2006). The study reviewed 1,958 cases of children who were removed by child welfare agencies from a home where their biological father did not reside. Among the study's findings about father involvement in child welfare cases:

- 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.

The *What about the Dads?* study also identified some key factors that can positively impact child welfare practice. Seventy percent of caseworkers had received training on engaging fathers, for example; and those who had were more likely to report having located fathers than those who had not. Further, the study found that the earlier a father is identified and located, the greater chance he will be contacted by the agency.

As a result of this research, the Federal government funded the National Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System (QIC-NRF) in 2006 to examine how the involvement of non-resident fathers in the public child welfare system impacts child safety, permanence, and well-being. The QIC-NRF objectives were to learn how the engagement of non-resident fathers' impacts the outcomes for their children in the system, better understand the gaps and barriers related to father involvement, and identify best practices for involving non-resident fathers and paternal kin in their children's lives.

Best practice with families should be based on a holistic approach, supporting and facilitating the engagement of *all* family members and individuals who play significant roles in the family and with the child. Federal child welfare laws support preserving families and engaging parents in reunification efforts, and states are required to provide services that will assist families in remedying the conditions that brought them into the child welfare system.

We understand that involving fathers in case planning and services can often be challenging, especially for those with children in the child welfare system and those who have been removed from their homes and placed in out-of-home treatment or foster care. The QIC-NRF offers extensive resources to support successful approaches for engaging fathers whose children are involved in child welfare (see Section IX: *Resources*). Those resources can help to increase engagement of fathers in the lives of their children, which in turn may significantly improve their children's well-being and likelihood of future success.

## ENGAGING FATHERS IN CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE IS IMPORTANT

A good father is critical to the optimal development and well being of a child. A father's role is more than that of economic provider and includes nurturing, caregiving, and emotional support. Successful fatherhood correlates with strongly positive outcomes. They can be part of the solutions to meet their children's needs for safety, stability/permanence, and well-being.

Fathers' involvement can positively support their children's safety and well-being in many other ways, too. Dads can offer additional perspectives about the needs and strengths of their children, and resources within the community and family. Fathers and paternal relatives may offer social or financial resources (e.g., health insurance, survivor benefits, child support funds) that can support a plan of reunification. In foster care situations, permanency for the child can be expedited by placing children with their non-resident fathers or with paternal kin, or through early relinquishment or termination of the father's parental rights.

### **An assortment of challenges can contribute to relatively low involvement by fathers in child welfare practice. Among them:**

- Fathers are generally much less immediately available to child welfare systems than are mothers. Most children who are removed and placed in protective foster care come from homes where their fathers are not living; it takes time, effort, and resources to locate those fathers.
- According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' *"What about the Dads?"* study, child welfare workers clearly *know* that the mother is the biological parent of the child; but only DNA testing or other time-consuming processes can establish paternity. Unless paternity has been established, a named father is not considered to be legally related to the child and cannot participate in court proceedings about the child.
- Mothers are often the gatekeepers to the father's participation and sometimes provide false information about the father or request that the father have no contact with the child, making it difficult to know the truth about either parent, and difficult to balance the mother's wishes with the best interest of the child.
- Child welfare agency culture often focuses on the needs of mothers and their children, while attention to fathers is often viewed as "punitive" in tone, typically related to child support enforcement. Some child welfare workers admit that the obligation to report fathers to child support undermines engaging them in the child welfare process.
- Many fathers work long hours and need services to be provided during non-traditional work hours, and fathers' situations may pose a barrier to contact (e.g., homeless or transient, live out of state, or lack reliable transportation).

- Few services and resources are designed to “fit” fathers’ needs. Parenting classes and support groups are typically designed for mothers, and service providers usually focus on the primary relationship between the mother and the child.
- When faced with these challenges, as well as high caseloads, child welfare workers often put less effort into engaging fathers in the case process because it is just “more difficult.”

Unfortunately, persistent myths about “absent fathers” can tend to discourage efforts to engage those fathers in child welfare. Two of these myths are debunked below by findings of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ *What about the Dads?* study:

**Myth 1: Non-resident fathers don’t want to be involved.** Fifty-three percent of the caseworkers believed that non-resident fathers wanted to be a part of the decision-making process for their children. Once fathers were identified and located, however, 90 percent demonstrated interest in the child’s case plan, placement, and future.

**Myth 2: Mothers and fathers of children in foster care present different challenges.** In 58 percent of the cases in which the child welfare agency had been in contact with the father, there were problems identified with substance abuse; in 53 percent of the cases, the father had criminal justice system involvement. Forty percent of these fathers had at least four of the potential problems reported in the study. *The mothers had similar problem profiles.* Sixty-five percent had alcohol or drug problems, 38 percent were involved with the criminal justice system, and 60 percent had four or more problems identified. Of all potential problems listed in the study, only the levels of criminal justice system involvement were lower for the mothers than for the fathers.

We recommend attention to several key considerations in efforts to effectively engage fathers involved with the child welfare system. 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 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.

These considerations about engagement impact agency policy, protocols, collaboration with other community agencies, workload, training, funding, and the identification and location of fathers.

Effective inclusion of fathers can be achieved throughout the full child welfare process in systems that are truly family-centered. Here are some specific suggestions at each stage:

### 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.

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## Section IX: Resources

### NATIONAL OR FEDERAL RESOURCES:

All Pro Dad (NFL Dad's Group): <http://www.allprodad.com/nflspokesmen/index.php>

Annie E. Casey Foundation, Responsible Fatherhood & Healthy Marriage Resources:  
<http://www.aecf.org/KnowledgeCenter/SpecialInterestAreas/ResponsibleFatherhoodMarriage.aspx>

National Center for Fathering: <http://www.fathers.com/>

National Center on Fathers and Families: <http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu/>

National Fatherhood Initiative: <http://www.fatherhood.org/>

National Fatherhood Leader Group: <http://www.nflgonline.org>

National Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System:  
<http://www.fatherhoodqic.org/>

Native American Fatherhood and Families Association:  
123 North Centennial Way, Mesa, AZ 85201  
480-833-5007, [info@aznaffa.org](mailto:info@aznaffa.org)

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Promoting Responsible Fatherhood:  
<http://www.fatherhood.hhs.gov/>

### RESOURCES ABOUT YOUNG FATHERS:

American Pregnancy Helpline, Guy's Corner: <http://www.thehelpline.org/guys-corner/>

Minnesota Fathers & Family Network. (2004). InfoSheet 4: Young Fathers: <http://www.mnfathers.org/documents/InfoSheetYoungDads.pdf>

Pregnant and Parenting Teen Initiative, Teen Father Services: <http://www.center-school.org/education/ppt/pptfather.htm>

The Zero Collective, Teenage and Young Adult Parents Resources: [http://www.vachss.com/help\\_text/teen\\_parents.html](http://www.vachss.com/help_text/teen_parents.html)

Teen Parents: [www.teenparents.org](http://www.teenparents.org)

### RESOURCES ABOUT GRANDFATHERS

USA.gov, Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: <http://www.usa.gov/Topics/Grandparents.shtml>

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: <http://www.raisingyourgrandchildren.com/>

AARP, Grandparenting Tips & Resources: [http://www-static-w3-ca.aarp.org/family/grandparenting/articles/grandparent\\_tip\\_sheet.html](http://www-static-w3-ca.aarp.org/family/grandparenting/articles/grandparent_tip_sheet.html)

The Foundation for Grandparenting: <http://www.grandparenting.org/>

## RESOURCES ABOUT FATHERS AND CHILD WELFARE:

Horn, W., & Sylvester, T. (2002). *Father Facts* (4th ed.). Gaithersburg, MD: National Fatherhood Initiative.

National Child Welfare Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice. (2002, Summer). *Best Practice/Next Practice: Father Involvement in Child Welfare: Estrangement and Reconciliation*: <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/newsletter/BPNPSummer02.pdf>

National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center. (2008). *A Closer Look: Family Involvement in Public Child Welfare Driven Systems of Care*: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/acloserlook/familyinvolvement/familyinvolvement.pdf>

Office on Child Abuse and Neglect, U.S. Children's Bureau. (2006). *Fathers and Their Impact on Children's Wellbeing*: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/fatherhood/chaptertwo.cfm>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2006). *What About the Dads? Child Welfare Agencies' Efforts to Identify, Locate, and Involve Nonresident Fathers*

- Research Summary: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/06/cw-involve-dads/rs.pdf>
- Full Report: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/06/CW-involve-dads/report.pdf>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2008). *More About the Dads: Exploring Associations Between Nonresident Father Involvement and Child Welfare Case Outcomes*: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/moreaboutdads/report.pdf>

## STATE FATHERHOOD INITIATIVES:

### **Colorado Dads, Be There for Your Kids**

[www.coloradodads.com](http://www.coloradodads.com)

### **Florida Commission on Responsible Fatherhood**

111 North Gadsden Street, Suite 200  
Tallahassee, FL 32301-1507  
850-488-4952  
<http://www.floridafathers.org>

### **Georgia Fatherhood Program**

Johnathan R. Ward, Coordinator  
1800 Century Place, Suite 400  
Atlanta, GA 30345-4304  
Phone: 404-679-0511  
Fax: 404-679-1675  
[jward@dtae.org](mailto:jward@dtae.org)  
<http://ocss.dhs.georgia.gov/portal/site/DHS-OCSE/menuitem.f3ca900e75789bd18e738510da1010a0/?vgnnextoid=b59a10ad92000010VgnVCM100000bf01010aRCRD>

### **Illinois Fatherhood Initiative**

208 S. LaSalle, Suite #1900  
Chicago, IL 60606  
Phone: 800-996-DADS/312-795-8631  
Fax: 312-795-8839  
[4fathersifi@sbcglobal.net](mailto:4fathersifi@sbcglobal.net)  
[www.4fathers.org](http://www.4fathers.org)

**Fathers and Families Center**

2835 North Illinois St.  
Indianapolis, IN 46208  
Phone: 317-921-5935  
Fax: 317-921-5954  
[www.fatherresource.org](http://www.fatherresource.org)

**Indiana: The Family Connection of St. Joseph County, Inc.**

Sue Christensen and Ann Rosen, Co-Directors  
132 N. Lafayette Blvd.  
South Bend, IN 46601  
Phone: 574-237-9740  
Fax: 574-237-1071  
[famconn@michiana.org](mailto:famconn@michiana.org)  
<http://community.michiana.org/famconn>

**Maryland Department of Human Resources: Fatherhood Programs**

311 West Saratoga St.  
Baltimore, MD 21201  
Phone: 800-322-6347  
<http://www.dhr.maryland.gov/fatherhood/>

**Pennsylvania Fatherhood Initiative**

Center for Schools and Communities  
275 Grandview Ave., Suite 200  
Camp Hill, PA 17011  
Phone: 717-763-1661  
[csc@csc.csiu.org](mailto:csc@csc.csiu.org)  
[www.center-school.org](http://www.center-school.org)

**South Carolina – Sisters of Charity Foundation**

2601 Laurel Street, Suite 250  
Columbia, SC 29204-2035  
Phone: 803-254-0230  
Fax: 803-748-0444  
[scfsc@sistersofcharitysc.com](mailto:scfsc@sistersofcharitysc.com)  
[http://www.sistersofcharitysc.com/resources/fatherhood\\_initiative\\_links/](http://www.sistersofcharitysc.com/resources/fatherhood_initiative_links/)

**The South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families**

2711 Middleburg Dr., Suite 115  
Columbia, SC 29204  
Phone: 803-254-0230  
Fax: 803-748-0444  
<http://www.scfathersandfamilies.com>

**Texas Fatherhood Initiative**

4301 Burnet Road, Suite B  
Austin, TX 78756  
Phone: 512-453-5056  
Fax: 512-453-5063  
tfi2000@austin.rr.com

**Virginia Fatherhood Campaign**

Ron J. Clark, Director of Fatherhood Programs, Main Street Station  
1500 East Main Street  
Richmond, VA 23219  
804-692-0400

**Washington State Fathers Network**

James May  
16120 NE 8th St.  
Bellevue, WA 98008-3937  
425-747-4004, ext. 218

**Washington State**

WADADS  
P. O. Box 5557  
Bellevue, WA 98006  
206-407-3666 / 866-241-8930

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