

# CHILD PROTECTION LEADER

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## Fathers and their Families: The Untapped Resource for Children Involved in the Child Welfare System

Recent statistics reveal that children living apart from their fathers are at an increased risk of suffering negative outcomes. One study found that the rate of child abuse in single-parent families is nearly twice the rate of child abuse in two-parent households (Federal Interagency Forum, 1997). Another study, after controlling for various variables, revealed that boys who grew up outside of intact marriages were, on average, more than twice as likely as other boys to end up in jail (Harper and McLanahan, 1998).

These findings have sparked increased interest in the critical role of fathers in their children's development. This interest is evidenced in societal expectations, foundation-supported and community-driven fatherhood programs, and, at a federal level, the enhanced Fatherhood Initiative.

### Federal Initiative on fatherhood

Building on programs developed in the 1990s to promote strong families and responsible fatherhood, in 2001, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services bolstered its commitment to the vital role of fathers in families by launching the Fatherhood Initiative that involves multiple federal departments. This initiative is guided by the following principles:

- Fathers can be important contributors to the well-being of their children.
- Parents are partners in raising their children, even when they do not live in the same household.
- The roles fathers play in families are diverse and related to cultural and community norms.
- Men should receive the education and support necessary to prepare them for the responsibility of parenthood.
- Government can encourage and promote father involvement through its programs and workforce policies.

### Fathers and the child welfare system

Among the fathers receiving notice are those whose children are involved in the child welfare system. For decades, the child welfare system has been criticized for being maternal-centered, focusing interventions, including those that blame, on mothers and not involving fathers and their relatives.

After performing a comprehensive literature review, which provides a portrait of fathers' involvement in permanency planning and child welfare casework, Sonenstein et al. (2002) concluded that little research exists on non-custodial father involvement in the child welfare permanency planning process. From what is available, data show that over 50% of children in foster care come from single parent, female-headed families (AFCARS 1999, as cited in Sonenstein). For approximately 80% of child welfare cases, paternity is known, but not necessarily established (NSPPRS 1994, as cited in Sonenstein).

Certain provisions of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 and the rise and interest in kinship placements can invigorate child welfare systems to involve fathers and their families in achieving the federal goals of child safety, permanency, and well-being. For example, concurrent case planning can provide an impetus for agencies, earlier in the process, to find and explore non-custodial fathers and their families as potential placement resources. In addition – to achieve the goal of adoption – agencies' identification of non-custodial parents can facilitate the termination of parental rights and access to medical records.

### FGDM and fathers

Another way to involve fathers and build family responsibility and community accountability for protecting children is family group decision making (FGDM), which is being implemented in more than 150 U.S. communities. FGDM unites and energizes concerned individuals by giving them a unique and vital opportunity to voice opinions about, get involved in, and gain control of situations that matter to them. Through FGDM, families tap their own existing resources to rebuild and strengthen social support networks and forge workable, strategic partnerships with formal systems. The practice and guiding philosophy reverses the tide of maternal-centered child welfare. Fathers and their families are actively targeted to participate in FGDM processes. The questions remain, though: If it is built, will they come, and will it make a difference?

Although research and evaluation on FGDM is in its infancy, a few evaluations have specifically looked at father and paternal relation involvement in creating plans for children. Gunderson et al. (2003, p. 44) reported that, in one study, for 57 family group conferences for which relationship data were available, an average of five maternal and three paternal relatives partook in the decision-making forum.

According to their analysis, “This level of paternal participation contrasted sharply with previous studies showing very few fathers involved in case planning, even for family-centered, family preservation services (O’Donnell 1999).”

Another study (Thoennes, 2003) showed FGDM produced an improved connection with fathers and their families over most existing child welfare practice. The study found, that in 62% of cases, fathers and, in 56% of cases, paternal relatives were contacted to participate in FGDM. Mothers and maternal relatives, however, were still approached at a greater rate to participate. This shows that even when holistic approaches like FGDM are implemented, difficulties can abound in securing paternal involvement. A number of factors may influence this level of participation, including difficulties in identifying or locating fathers and their families, mothers’ unwillingness to involve them, and potential child welfare system bias against fathers.

A meta-analysis of 25 FGDM studies – international in scope – found that FGDM compares favorably to traditional child welfare practice in achieving safety, permanency, and well-being for children (Merkel-Holguin, et al., 2003). While more scientific and rigorous research is needed to gain a fuller understanding of FGDM, and in particular, the effects of non-custodial fathers’ involvement on children involved in the child welfare system, the initial results hold promise that with concerted efforts, fathers and their families increasingly will play a meaningful role in children’s lives.

### Finding a framework

Despite the positive potential of involving fathers and paternal relations, there remain some roadblocks, which could be overcome with an organized framework.

The National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF) offers such a framework that was devised by distilling practitioners’ experiences serving fathers, mothers, children, and families. For those engaged in FGDM, this framework highlights the importance and difficulty of involving fathers and their families while supporting the notion that the circle requires widening to ensure their participation. Through the seven Core Learnings of NCOFF, professionals can examine their work and strategize how to maximize father and family involvement in children’s lives:

1. Fathers care – even if that caring is not shown in conventional ways.
2. Father presence matters – in terms of economic well-being, social support, and child development.
3. Joblessness and unemployment are major impediments to family formation and family involvement.
4. Systemic barriers – in existing approaches to public benefits, child support enforcement, and paternity establishment – operate to create obstacles and disincentives to father involvement.
5. A growing number of young fathers and mothers need additional support (co-parenting) to develop the vital skills needed to share parenting responsibilities.

6. The transition from the role of biological father to committed parent has significant development implications for young fathers.
7. The behaviors of young parents, both fathers and mothers, are influenced significantly by intergenerational beliefs and practices within their families of origin.

FGDM provides the child welfare and court systems, broader community, and families an opportunity to create practices that embody these principles. Through FGDM, fathers and their families are actively sought out, systemic barriers are identified, and plans are created that promote child safety and address the informal supports and formal services needed by young fathers and mothers.

### Future directions

While undoubtedly fathers can play a significant and important role in their children’s lives, fathers’ families for too long have been ignored as a point of connection, a cultural foundation, and potential resource for their children. Based on the guiding principles of the Fatherhood Initiative and the seven Core Learnings of NCOFF, it is imperative to leverage the care and concern of fathers **and their families** for their children involved in the child welfare system. The data herein provide recent evidence that FGDM may be one promising practice to better protect children, strengthen families, and rebuild communities of care.

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