



The Blue Sheet

Practical Application of Iowa's Blueprint for Permanency

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Involving Fathers in the Lives of Their Children Identifying, Locating, and Engaging Fathers

This *Blue Sheet* is devoted to the child welfare practice of identifying, locating, and engaging fathers in the lives of their children.

At the very beginning and throughout a family's

have the right to be involved in the decisions that affect their children, paternal relatives can be an invaluable resource to children, and fathers can positively contribute to their children's well-being.

"It is important to start from the assumption that it is a good thing to identify the father and that he needs to be given a chance to make a positive contribution to the process. He may not take us up on it and he may never appear in the case but it is not the choice of a social worker or attorney or judge to make based on what the mother says about him or based on what a criminal history may say about him without any other considerations."

District Associate Judge Colin J. Witt

involvement in the child welfare system, we need to recognize the significance of a father's involvement to the well-being of his children. We must work to counteract the tendencies of social workers to overlook fathers in child protection practices because children have the right to know their family connections, fathers

"Simply stated, dads and paternal relatives should no longer be sidelined, excluded, or marginalized in the lives of their children."

American Humane FGDM Issues in Brief, Dads and Paternal Relatives: Using Family Group Decision Making to Refocus the Child Welfare System on the Entire Family Constellation, © Nov. 2009.

Involving Fathers



Father involvement is undeniably important to children. Children with involved fathers display better cognitive outcomes; higher self-esteem and less depression as teenagers; greater academic achievement; lower levels of substance use; and higher levels of pro-social behaviors.

Furthermore, father involvement contributes to positive child development, even in the case of non-resident father (Schmid, 2006). In contrast, children in father-absent homes have a higher risk of living in poverty, failing in school, developing emotional or behavioral problems, abusing drugs, being abused or neglected, becoming involved in crime, and committing suicide.

National Fatherhood Initiative 2007

Iowa Fatherhood Initiatives

Barriers to Locating

Fathers: "The culture of child welfare agencies has created several barriers to effective identification and location of fathers, including large worker caseloads, a lack of standards or guidelines for diligent searches, and a biased perception among some workers that engaging non-custodial parents is too difficult (Howard, 2009). For example, some workers view fathers as "liabilities" (i.e., as failing to contribute to their children's development in meaningful ways) and/or as "threats" (i.e., fathers in the child welfare system are often classified as abusive and dangerous) (Schmid, 2006, pp. 21-22). In addition, gender dynamics and worker bias may impede the ability of caseworkers to fully engage fathers in case planning processes."¹

Iowa's Fatherhood

Initiatives: In Iowa's child welfare system, location and engagement of parents is seen as a responsibility of all parties working with a family; public and private social workers as well as the court.

On the State level, as part of the CFSR-PIP, standards of practice were developed to identify primary expectations and strategies regarding

¹ American Humane FGDM Issues in Brief, Dads and Paternal Relatives: Using Family Group Decision Making to Refocus the Child Welfare System on the Entire Family Constellation, © Nov. 2009

identification, location, and engagement of parents throughout the life of the DHS case. As part of these standards, diligent, ongoing, and comprehensive inquiry about the location of the father is required; assessment of the relationship and dynamics between custodial and non-custodial parent is required; active attempts to involve the father in assessment, family team decision-making meetings, case planning, family interaction, and services are required. Diligent search includes using Internet Search Tools, White and Yellow Pages, Federal Parent Locator Service, Prison Locators, Courts On-line, social networking sites, and person search sites.

Because circumstances change throughout the life of the case, efforts to identify, locate, and engage fathers need to continue until successful.

Private providers have initiated family finding techniques. They also assist in identifying fathers, and engaging paternal and maternal relatives in being a resource for children in foster care.

The Iowa Blueprint for Forever Families calls for an increase in the use of effective evidence-based family approaches and engagement strategies. Therapeutic approaches that work with families and children in both child welfare and juvenile

justice, such as Functional Family Therapy, Multisystemic Therapy, Aggression Replacement Therapy, Family Interaction, behavioral/cognitive therapy and relapse prevention, and Family Team Decision Making (FTDM) demonstrate effectiveness.

The Juvenile Court also is addressing the need to engage fathers as an important and basic *due process and fairness matter*. For example, the District 5 Juvenile Court has started to change the court language regarding what has to be done to identify and serve fathers. They have started to put mothers under oath in court, requiring them to fill out paternity affidavits, and simultaneously use every method of identification and location possible. Facebook and other social media resources are used to expand the traditional methods of finding fathers. Workers are not allowed to skip over the section of a social work case plan concerning "concerted efforts" to locate non-custodial parents; they may not answer "N/A."²

² Involving Fathers in the Lives of Their Children: Recognizing This Important Permanency Option for Children in Foster Care Hon. Colin Witt, District Associate Judge, Polk County Juvenile Court (IA)

Framework for Engaging Fathers and Paternal Relatives

It is important to remember that our own perceptions about fathers carry over into our professional relationships. The perceptions social workers carry about men in general; and their positive or negative experiences with their own father-figure impact their ability to engage fathers. In addition, their perceptions about minority men can impact the effectiveness of engaging.

“Not only do minority men have to deal with the challenges of what it means to be a man in today’s society, minority men must also work harder to overcome the obstacles placed in their path simply due to their race and ethnicity. The result is a double bind in which men of color find themselves attempting to fulfill a patriarchal ideal established by white middle-class men, while struggling to negate the image of deviant, violent, drug dealer or abuser, irresponsible, deadbeat and absent. Social workers need to be mindful of extra burdens placed upon minority fathers as they attempt to engage them.”³

The way men are socialized in our society can make it difficult for them to seek help and remain involved with their children when they may not be able to live up to society’s expectations for fathers. Understanding the gender role is critical to engaging and relating to fathers in a more sensitive and strength-focused way. The following guidance for engaging fathers is provided

in the training curriculum, “Engaging the Non-Resident Father:”

- “Recognize and acknowledge the previous experiences the father may have had with child welfare. The worker should be cautious about trying to correct his assessment or

“Outcomes improve when youth and their parents are active participants in their own planning and service provision.”
Iowa Blueprint Forever Families

- explain his experience away. Seek to use his experience as a pivotal point to impact the course of his child’s life.
- Be clear and transparent about the reasons for the agency’s involvement and the father’s role throughout the process. Suspicion may be present and he may think he is only being sought for child support. Seek and support open feedback to ensure active, two-way communication and understanding between the social worker and the father.
- Start from the assumption that the father wants to be involved, and assist the father in developing a plan to make that happen. Too often, we start from the

Highlight on Family Team Decision-Making

“FTDM values and principles support the engagement of fathers and paternal relatives in numerous ways, breaking down the maternal focus of the child welfare system and encouraging a broader systemic change in how families are engaged in the child welfare process.

A cornerstone of FTDM is that the extended family constellation is entitled to participate in making decisions about the children’s safety and wellbeing, including them, can “widen the circle” of support and empower fathers and paternal relatives to make meaningful investments and commitments in the lives of their children (Pennell & Burford, 1994). ...The engagement of fathers throughout every phase of the process is critical. The facilitator makes conscious efforts to connect with fathers, paternal family members, and male relatives during the preparation phase (Schmid, 2006). When the relationship between the mother and father is strained, non-existent, or volatile, the facilitator is also working with the female caregiver around the father’s participation. Facilitators and other professionals should “speak to the involvement and protective capacities [that] men offer to the family” both during the actual FTDM and when the family implements its plan and acquires services (Schmid, 2006, p. 27).”

American Humane FGDM Issues in Brief, Dads and Paternal Relatives: Using Family Group Decision Making to Refocus the Child Welfare System on the Entire Family Constellation, © Nov. 2009

³ Training Curriculum: Engaging the Non-Resident Father, Michelle Howard, M.S., LPC, American Humane Association, 2010

assumption that the father doesn't want to be involved and will be difficult to engage because traditional culture states that men are the providers and disconnected from their children, and women are the caretakers and nurturers of their children. Many of us may have been unconsciously socialized in adhering to these stereotypes, thus making the assumption that the father doesn't want to be involved. Changing this initial viewpoint can be a useful first step in your engagement.

- Facilitate the restoration of the father in the life of the child by co-creating goals based on his strengths, not his deficits. The traditional culture of manhood encourages admiring men for their physical strength, occupational status, economic gains and competitive spirit. If the father you are speaking with falls short in some way based upon what he and/or the social worker believes, it can present a barrier to successfully identifying his strengths. Remove those traditional cultural ideals and build in opportunities for success in the case planning by developing short-term goals that are achievable and that foster a feeling of accomplishment.
- Work on a case-by-case basis. Let each father speak for himself. The father may make the assumption that the social worker is assessing him through the lens of "dead beat," "absent," "no good" (to use that nomenclature)

father. He may present as defensive because of this. Therefore, it is important to ensure that he is aware that you see him for who he is.

- Suspend judgments. You will hear negative things about the father, likely even before you have met him. There are two sides to every story, and the child is depending upon you to hear and evaluate both sides.
- Make room for expressions of anger. Anger is one of the few acceptable emotions for men and may be the only one they are comfortable expressing. There is a difference between expressions of anger, which are quite natural and threatening behavior. We will discuss more about this in a little bit.
- Acknowledge the social worker's power, but remind the father of his own power to use his assets to keep his child safe. This can best be accomplished by remaining engaged and involved. Remember that men often struggle with feelings of helplessness and hopelessness so if they can "do" something to make a difference this may help them recognize their own power in the situation.
- Help the non-resident father identify his assets. Use family and friends and other men who know the father to identify his strengths and how those strengths might be used to stay involved and relevant in the life of his child.
- Remind the father of how important he is in the life of the child, how there are some things only he can provide and that his child

will carry what he does with him or her forever.

- If he has been the person who has caused harm or been neglectful in some manner, encourage the opportunity to change. Let him know that he is not the sum of his mistakes and he has an opportunity to do something different at any point in his life; however, his children need him now.
- Ask the father how he wants his children to remember him 10-15 years from now. Even men who have been toxic to their families have positive visions about what they would like to mean to their children. It's a good "doorway" for non-defensive self-reflection. You can ask: "How would you like your children to remember you?" If he describes a positive vision of how he would like his children to remember him, the social worker can ask: "What can you do to make that happen?" and "How can I help you with that?"
- Remind the father that he is a role model to his child. Boys learn about manhood from their fathers, and girls get a sense of what to expect from men from their fathers.
- Clearly and directly explain the expectations of the agency. Acknowledge that some of the expectations may seem unfair and unreasonable. Ask for any suggestions he may have to make it easier to meet those expectations, but do not promise any help that cannot be delivered."

A Father's Perspective

One of the leaders of the Des Moines Fatherhood Initiative is Edwin Daye, birth and adoptive father. Daye, his partner and his infant son, received the collaborative support offered to families in Judge Connie Cohen's Juvenile Courtroom through the Des Moines Safe Babies Court Team.

The following is excerpted from an interview Daye gave to ZERO TO THREE and Lovett Stories and Strategies in December 2010

I pretty much grew up on the streets, so I was a part of the drugs and the gangs. I think back on what really pushed me, [it] was my mother passing away and, you know, I got a chance to be with my mom the day before she passed away and she said, you know, you got to take care of your sisters and brothers. And with me being the oldest boy, knowing what my mom did to take care of all the kids, you know, it was time for me to start being a grownup, stop going to jail, and stop running the streets. So with this little boy being in the picture now I had to stop and think about not just myself but what was best for him. When I saw him in the hospital, and I saw that he was smaller than all the rest of the babies, and I also found out that he had crack cocaine in his system...to see him sitting there shaking from the withdrawals really was one of the big things that drew me to him. The only way that he was going to get better was if someone loved him, and me being the father I had no choice but to, you know, to make sure that he was all right.

There's a lot of reasons why I wasn't considered to be able to take care of my son and the biggest thing was just coming out of prison, having a substance abuse issue, not having a very good job and not being in society very long, so that was one of the big issues that DHS had. The mother was still a part of my son's life and due to the fact that the mother was still involved then, I mean, I was just a secondary placement. One of the biggest things to me is that when you have kids, mom is the primary regardless of anything and dad is just a secondary — and sometimes not even a secondary—because the mother's family members usually come first. So after going through everything that I went through, I know the mother still had ample times to get her life back together to take [our son] home with her but she didn't want to do the services...even though my UA's were clean and hers wasn't, and, you know, I didn't quite understand why it was so hard for me, you know? If this is my son, to have my son knowing that I'm not using at the time and, you know, I have a place, a stable home and, I mean, from my understanding because I never had any dealings with DHS before so I didn't know what to expect when it came time to speak about me getting custody of him.

What I went through I never want to go through again...Where I'm at now in my life and, and where [my partner] is in her life, we know that [raising my son] is something that we were supposed to do a long time ago. We got an opportunity to do it and that's what we're doing— no setbacks. We just move forward and that's one thing about our family now. You know? We look forward. We don't look behind us. We don't really like to talk about what took place all the way up until now. But sometimes we do and, [and] it helps us to remember where we don't want to be again.

I see myself grown up, no longer scared of anything or anyone. I know that I'm a better person today, and a lot of people see me differently. I've been recognized a lot more by people in my community, they call me and ask me, "Would you help out with the kids?" And that's one thing that they never asked me before because I was a problem for the community. Now that I'm not, I'm older and a lot wiser about what's going on with my neighborhood, I mean, they see me differently. I volunteer for the urban development football league. It's third, fourth, fifth and sixth graders, girl and boy tackle football. I referee every year. This is going to be my third year. I work for Morgan Streeter [on the Fatherhood Initiative]. I facilitate the Wednesday night fatherhood initiative class and I'm also a Parent Partner now. So, I mean, those are some things that I never thought in a million years I'd be doing but I always wanted to and I got the opportunity to do that now. I'm not in trouble. I'm not in debt anymore. I have a home. I have two vehicles. I'm working. My family's healthy and I have control of my life now.