

# Engaging and Supporting Fathers in Child Welfare

Father involvement has numerous benefits to child development and well-being, family dynamics, and society. However, child welfare systems have historically tended to undervalue fathers in their children's lives (Bellamy et al., 2023). While mothers are often viewed as primary caregivers, fathers involved with child welfare face layered, nuanced barriers to engagement.

Improving father engagement begins with recognizing how organizational policies and practices and individual attitudes and actions perpetuate barriers and exclude fathers. This publication is designed to help child welfare leaders improve policies, programs, and practices. The strategies and information included can be used to create environments that welcome and champion fathers as a vital part of promoting safety, permanency, and well-being for their families.

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## THE IMPORTANCE OF FATHER INVOLVEMENT

The association between father involvement and child well-being, development, and outcomes is well studied. Both fathers who live with their children and fathers who do not can positively impact their children's lives. Father involvement is associated with the following benefits:

- Greater cognitive ability, higher levels of social-emotional competence, and fewer behavioral problems among children (Diniz et al., 2021)
- Reduced internalizing and externalizing<sup>1</sup> behavior problems among boys (Marchand-Reilly & Yaure, 2019) as well as children and youth at risk of maltreatment (Yoon et al., 2018)
- Better academic outcomes, particularly among children with a low socioeconomic status living with resident fathers (Miller et al., 2020)
- Benefits for future generations, as men who have an involved father as a child are more likely to form strong relationships with their own children (Jessee & Adamsons, 2018)
- Positive foster care outcomes, including improved permanency and placement stability as a result of high-quality engagement (Trahan et al., 2020)

<sup>1</sup> Internalizing behaviors are focused on the self or experienced internally (e.g., anxiety, social withdrawal, depression), whereas externalizing behaviors are characterized by actions in the external world (e.g., aggression, acting out, defiance).

## The Rights of Fathers

Fathers who are not the subject of a child protective services investigation or the respondent in a maltreatment case have the right to care for their children without protective interventions unless otherwise determined by a court. All parents involved with child welfare, including fathers, are entitled to the same rights, unless otherwise determined by a court. These include rights to the following:

- Having quality legal representation
- Participating in case planning
- Requesting services that will improve the safety of their home or their family's well-being
- Being kept informed
- Having an interpreter and a copy of their case plan in their preferred language

In the event of a removal, parents also have rights to the following:

- Visiting their children
- Pursuing reunification

Some parental rights vary by State. The American Bar Association has State-specific [guides on rights](#) for parents whose children have been removed from their home.

## NATIONAL STATISTICS

Despite the many benefits of father involvement in their children's lives and in child welfare planning and decision-making, fathers have been historically overlooked by the child welfare system. Table 1 highlights data from round 3 of the Child and Family Services Reviews, covering fiscal years 2015 to 2018, regarding disparities in the child welfare experiences of fathers versus mothers.

Another layer is the overlap of child welfare and incarceration. According to the [National Survey of Children's Health](#), in 2021, approximately 4.5 million children had a caregiver—male or female—who had served time in jail or prison after they were born. Parental incarceration likely affects fathers more than mothers since men comprise 93 percent of the general prison population (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2024).

**TABLE 1. MOTHER–FATHER DISPARITIES IN CHILD WELFARE EXPERIENCES**

	Mothers and maternal relatives	Fathers and paternal relatives
The frequency of parent-child visits was sufficient to maintain or promote the relationship.	75%	68%
The quality of parent-child visits was sufficient to maintain or promote the relationship.	82%	79%
Agencies made concerted efforts to identify, locate, inform, and evaluate relatives as potential placements for children.	56%	47%
Parents received encouragement to participate in their children's school activities, afterschool programs, and medical appointments.	43%	19%
Agencies provided appropriate services to meet parents' identified needs.	57%	42%
Agencies made concerted efforts to involve parents in case planning.	64%	49%
Parents never saw their caseworkers.	5%	18%

Source: JBS International, Inc., 2020

## Supporting Fathers Who Are Incarcerated

Children involved with child welfare may have parents who are incarcerated. Having policies and practices specific to working with parents who are incarcerated is an important element of improving father engagement in child welfare. Parents who are incarcerated have many of the same rights as other parents in child welfare, such as the right to participate in case planning and have regular visits with their children, unless otherwise determined by a court. They also can be beneficial partners in child welfare work by providing information about family resources, helping identify relatives, and being important sources of support and connection for their children (Administration for Children and Families, 2018). However, a parent's incarceration status can be a barrier to engagement. Agencies can support efforts to engage parents who are incarcerated by collaborating with the prison, legal, and judicial communities to eliminate barriers. More information is available in Child Welfare Information Gateway's [Child Welfare Practice With Families Affected by Parental Incarceration](#).

## THE BARRIERS THAT FATHERS FACE

Creating an environment that welcomes, supports, and engages fathers requires an understanding of the barriers they may encounter. Many of these barriers are embedded in the ways that human services organizations function and should be addressed through system-level change. An important first step in addressing these barriers is building awareness of them and recognizing their role in attitudes, policies, and practices.

**Role expectations.** Societal views that fathers are providers and protectors and mothers are nurturers and primary caregivers can act as a barrier to father engagement in child welfare. These beliefs may drive staff to prioritize engagement with mothers while viewing father engagement as unnecessary or unimportant (Bellamy et al., 2023). This can lead to fathers being excluded from services, left out of decision-making, valued solely for their financial contributions, or judged for their ability to provide financial resources. These views can also limit caseworkers' efforts to identify, locate, and engage nonresident fathers.

**Organization and program design.** Role expectations can be embedded in the ways that organizations function, resulting in programs designed to specifically serve mothers. These tendencies can manifest in a variety of ways, such as only using images of women in offices and pamphlets, addressing mail only to mothers, naming programs for women (e.g., the Women, Infants, and Children Nutrition Program), or offering services only during traditional working

hours, thus preventing the participation of working fathers. Organizational prioritization of mothers, even if unintentional, can result in lower levels of father engagement, failure to address fathers' specific needs, and father perceptions that programs are "not for them" (Bellamy et al., 2023).

**Parental gatekeeping.** Parental gatekeeping is when one parent's actions, beliefs, and behaviors impact the other parent's relationship and interactions with the child (Schoppe-Sullivan & Altenburger, 2019). "Gate opening" refers to encouraging or supportive behaviors (e.g., when one parent shares details about an afterschool activity with the other parent). In contrast, "gate closing" refers to discouraging or restrictive behaviors (e.g., when one parent withholds medical information about the child from the other parent). Much of the research on the topic focuses on maternal gatekeeping, with evidence suggesting that maternal gate-closing behaviors are associated with decreased engagement and quality of parenting among fathers and that maternal gate-opening behaviors are associated with higher levels of paternal engagement (Altenburger et al., 2018; Fagan & Cherson, 2017). Parental gatekeeping can hinder coparenting efforts and negatively affect a father's relationship with the child as well as their involvement in the child's health, schooling, and social life.

**Mutual fear.** When fathers are involved with child welfare, fear can impact how they engage with the system, caseworkers, and service providers. Fathers may experience fear stemming from the possibility that their children will be permanently removed, not understanding the system, having to vocalize and discuss their problems, and being

misunderstood. That fear can present itself in different emotions and actions (e.g., passion, aggression, withdrawal, disengagement) that could be detrimental to the father if misinterpreted by others. Conversely, caseworkers may experience fear of fathers or perceive fathers as threats. Some fear may stem from past experiences with men or male clients. It may also stem from the stereotype that men involved with social services are violent (Baum, 2017). Regardless of its origin, fear can result in caseworkers labeling fathers as dangerous without ever having met them, generalizing all men as distrustful, and not attempting to empathize with men (Baum, 2017).

**Communication style.** Social norms of masculinity and male communication can be a barrier to engagement in child welfare services. Society trains men to be strong and independent, deny pain, and inhibit their feelings (Baum, 2017). These attitudes can conflict with participation in social services, which requires men to acknowledge their needs, vulnerabilities, and challenges. Being unwilling to ask for help or vocalize weakness can lead to men not receiving the services they need. Pride may also prevent men from asking questions about child welfare processes, which can impede their ability to navigate the system. Communication styles among men can also hinder relationship building with caseworkers or service providers. For example, when answering questions, men tend to limit their replies to the specific information requested rather than offering extended answers, and when expressing strong feelings, some men raise their voices (Baum, 2017). A child welfare professional may perceive these responses as negative, which can impact engagement efforts and outcomes.

## Programs for Fathers

There are many programs designed to meet the different needs of fathers of all backgrounds, including federally funded responsible fatherhood programs. They may provide parenting services, marriage and coparenting skills training, employment and economic stability support, services for fathers formerly or currently incarcerated, and more. Some of the most successful programs are ones that build partnerships to expand program reach, seek leadership buy-in, intentionally include and value fathers' voices, and document and learn from father engagement work (Campbell et al., 2023).

There are many [resources available to support the development of successful fatherhood programs](#). Explore the following for more information:

- [Father Engagement in Child Welfare: Lessons for Fatherhood Programs](#) (Fathers and Continuous Learning in Child Welfare)
- [Getting and Keeping Fathers Interested in Your Program](#) (National Fatherhood Initiative [NFI])

To find State and local fatherhood programs, refer to the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse's [program map](#).

## CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT FOR FATHER ENGAGEMENT

Improving father engagement requires organizations to develop and sustain an environment that welcomes fathers. This

goes beyond simply offering fatherhood programs, which is an important aspect of father engagement but only a piece of the whole puzzle. Child welfare agencies should first look inward at their organizational environment to assess if it is truly welcoming to families and caregivers of all types, including fathers, single parents, and kin caregivers. Developing a welcoming environment includes understanding the aforementioned barriers and attitudes that fathers face and actively working to change policies, programs, and practices that exacerbate those challenges. It is essential to include fathers with lived child welfare experience at every stage of this work, including in assessments, decision-making, policy development, and evaluation.

Leaders are responsible for encouraging father-friendly and engaging child welfare practices among caseworkers. The information in this section can be used to develop agency culture, trainings, coaching, and more that reflects and promotes meaningful engagement of fathers. The professionals with whom fathers directly interact can make or break fathers' experiences and outcomes with child welfare. Caseworkers' attitudes and skills have a significant impact on fathers' understanding of their case plans and confidence in completing case plan goals (Coakley et al., 2018). Disengagement can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. If child welfare professionals treat fathers like they do not want to be involved, they may remove themselves. Contrarily, if a caseworker treats fathers as willing to participate and capable of positive change, fathers may view themselves in the same light.

## ORGANIZATIONAL ASSESSMENT

Conducting an organizational assessment is a first step in creating an environment for father engagement. This includes intentionally examining agency policies, practices, and programs for gaps in services for fathers or barriers to engagement. A good place to start is by conducting a father friendliness assessment. The following self-assessments are available online:

- [Father Friendly Check-Up](#) (NFI)
- [Father-Friendliness Organizational Self-Assessment and Planning Tool](#) (National Center for Strategic Nonprofit Planning and Community Leadership)
- [Toolkit for Building System Capacity to Engage Fathers and Paternal Relatives in Child Welfare: Self-Assessment](#) (Fathers and Continuous Learning in Child Welfare)

Upon determining their strengths and weaknesses, organizations can partner with fathers to work on areas of improvement. For example, an agency may identify family-finding policies, language and imagery, male representation on staff, and service accessibility as areas that could improve their father friendliness. Addressing those shortcomings and sustaining an environment that welcomes fathers over time requires commitment and [continuous quality improvement](#) (CQI).

## STAFFING

Staffing is another important element of an organization that values and prioritizes father engagement. Staff at all levels need to be invested in developing an organization that is welcoming to fathers. Leadership should lead

by example and provide caseworkers and supervisors with regular training to help them better engage and support fathers. Beyond training and workshops, organizations should foster an environment of continuous learning through mentorship and coaching. They should also implement hiring practices that prioritize recruiting and retaining fathers with lived experience. These staff members can bring many benefits. For example, fathers who have experienced incarceration might be well positioned to advocate for and work with parents who are incarcerated.

### Staff Training

Providing training for staff who work with fathers is an essential piece of building a father-friendly organization. Ongoing training can help staff understand the necessity of father engagement and maintain high-quality practices (Campbell et al., 2023).

NFI offers a free learning center with [on-demand webinars](#) on a variety of topics, such as using social media in fatherhood programs, engaging fathers in home visiting programs, improving policy development, and more. It also has a [Fatherhood Engagement Academy](#) with various courses and certifications available for purchase. In addition, Child Welfare Information Gateway has several [free podcast episodes on engaging fathers](#), available on the Information Gateway website, Spotify, or Apple Podcasts.

## **PARTNERSHIPS**

Tapping into community and cross-system partnerships is another important piece of father engagement. Many fatherhood programs and support groups are community-based. Developing relationships with these groups can allow agencies to quickly connect fathers with supports. In addition, encouraging staff to participate in community events like block parties, volunteering events, faith-based activities, and more could help caseworkers connect with families outside of child welfare-related tasks and reduce the stigma of system involvement. In addition, cross-system partnerships can help child welfare agencies identify and locate fathers and paternal relatives. These partners can include child support, criminal justice, and economic justice systems.

## **ADDRESSING ATTITUDES AGAINST FATHERS**

Much of fathers' negative experiences with child welfare stem from attitudes and beliefs within child welfare and other systems. Caseworkers may make notes and observations that unnecessarily judge fathers and may even negatively impact their case outcomes. For example, after an interaction with a father, a caseworker may make a note that says, "This father was not as forthcoming with information as the other parent." However, the father may feel he adequately answered the caseworker's questions. In this scenario, the note has a negative connotation, which could impact the agency's decision-making about the father. If the father provided the information requested, it is not necessary to add additional details, such as the unfair comparison of parents, as it could cause unnecessary harm. Once workers become

aware of these tendencies, they can begin to notice how they manifest in their daily interactions.

## **Engaging Nonrespondent Fathers**

Agencies should implement practices for identifying and locating nonrespondent fathers. Sometimes called "nonoffending parents," these are fathers who are not the subject of the child protective services investigation. They may be nonresident fathers (i.e., fathers who do not live with their children) or noncustodial fathers (i.e., fathers who do not have primary physical custody of their children). These fathers have the right to have their children placed in their care unless it is determined that it is not in the best interest of the children. In addition to being given first consideration as a placement option, nonrespondent fathers can be involved with the case in a variety of ways, including providing information about the family's background and history and connecting the child and agency with paternal relatives. Other paternal relatives can also be potential placement options as well as sources of support and information. Agencies should implement robust family-finding policies and practices that prioritize father engagement. These models may include identifying fathers and paternal relatives, contacting them, conducting paternity testing when necessary, and involving fathers and paternal relatives in case planning, permanency planning, and court hearings.

Rather than judging or criticizing, caseworkers should leverage interactions with fathers to identify families' strengths, challenges, and areas of improvement. These kinds of observations may help illuminate underlying issues that can be addressed to improve fathers' engagement. For example, if a caseworker observes that a father seems awkward around his child, it may be a sign that he does not know how to play or interact with the child at that age. Instead of making a note that the father appears awkward, the caseworker can connect the father with educational resources about childhood ages and stages, which can ultimately improve his interactions with his child. This moves the focus from judgments to solutions.

### PROMOTING BEST PRACTICES

The following are other casework strategies that child welfare professionals can use to engage fathers:

- **Building relationships and developing rapport can go a long way.** Taking time to get to know fathers can help them feel comfortable, seen, and heard. Some things that can help build relationships and rapport include taking them to lunch, participating in activities not related to child welfare, and talking about hobbies and interests. Having discussions about casual topics can lead to greater comfort when talking about difficult topics.
- **Knowledge is power.** Sharing information (in clear terms that avoid jargon) can help fathers understand their rights and what is happening with their cases. Caseworkers should recognize that pride can inhibit communications and fathers may be

hesitant to ask questions or admit they don't know something. Specifically, it can be helpful to walk through timelines and steps so that fathers understand what needs to happen for them to reach a goal, whether that be unsupervised visits, reunification, or something else.

- **Learning about fathers' backgrounds and community connections can help caseworkers understand what makes them who they are.** It also shows that they care. In addition, learning about a father's routines and interests can bring clarity to case activities. For example, it could be helpful to know that a father regularly attends a religious service that takes place at the same time as a child welfare program or service.
- **Connecting fathers with mentors can be a powerful tool.** Many people who experience child welfare benefit from hearing about the experience of others who have gone through it. This person may also serve as someone other than a child welfare professional who can provide information and resources.
- **Celebrating accomplishments, validating progress, and acknowledging wins, no matter how small, can encourage fathers to continue achieving goals.** A caseworker could be the only person from whom the father receives positive affirmation.

More information and strategies for working with fathers are available in [Responsible Fatherhood Toolkit: Resources From the Field](#).

## CONCLUSION

Fathers in child welfare face nuanced challenges that may be due to role expectations, incarcerated status, and more. It is the responsibility of agencies to assess how their organization's policies, practices, procedures, and attitudes contribute to barriers and implement change to address those issues. Improving father engagement within an organization is a process that takes sustained commitment. It starts and ends with developing an organization that is welcoming of fathers. It requires staff at all levels to champion and advocate for fathers. Steps to improve father friendliness can lead to increased father engagement and, ultimately, improved outcomes and well-being for children, youth, and families.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- The [Father Engagement and Father Involvement Toolkit](#) provides guidance on implementing new practices, programs, and interventions that enhance father engagement. The toolkit includes information about assessment, planning, training, evaluation, and more.
- [Fathers and Continuous Learning](#) is a project from the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) that operated from 2017 to 2023. The project's goals were to synthesize information about father engagement and CQI approaches in child welfare, map touch points within child welfare cases where fathers could be more fully engaged, identify strategies to increase engagement, implement CQI approaches to improve father engagement at pilot sites, and conduct studies and evaluations of results.

- Information Gateway's [Identifying and Engaging Fathers webpage](#) presents resources on the importance of father involvement in the lives of their children and best practices for engaging fathers in child welfare practice.
- The [National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse](#) is a national resource funded by the HHS Office of Family Assistance that features information for fathers, practitioners, programs, States, and others interested in supporting fathers and families.
- [NFI](#) is a nonprofit organization that works to increase father involvement by providing training, programs, and resources on fatherhood topics to communities and human services organizations.

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