



Dads and Paternal Relatives: Using Family Group Decision Making to Refocus the Child Welfare System on the Entire Family Constellation

By Molly Jenkins and Ellen Kinney

Due to the many challenges facing families today, more children are growing up in homes without their fathers. This often results in fathers having a diminished role in their children's daily lives. When children become involved in the public child welfare system, engaging fathers in their children's lives can become even more difficult. Furthermore, many children involved with the child welfare system did not have fathers living with them at the time of child welfare involvement, creating a need to identify, locate, and contact the non-resident father (NRF).

Why Is Father Involvement Important?

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 (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2007). Furthermore, father involvement contributes to positive child development, even in the case of NRFs (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).

Finding and Working With Dads

In 2006, the Urban Institute published a report on child welfare agencies' efforts to identify, locate, and involve NRFs in the child welfare process. The report, entitled *What About the Dads?*, reviewed cases of children who were removed from homes where their biological fathers did not reside. Telephone interviews with the involved caseworkers found that 70% of caseworkers had received training on engaging fathers, and caseworkers who received training were more likely to report having located fathers. However, while 88% of NRFs were identified by the agency, only 55% were contacted by a caseworker, indicating that training may not be sufficient to address broader systemic issues. Of the contacted NRFs, 30% visited

their children and 28% expressed an interest in assuming custody of their children, demonstrating that many fathers would like to be involved with their children (Malm, Murray, & Geen, 2006).

Despite these positive findings, some workers noted that working with fathers can be difficult; 82% of caseworkers believed that fathers need assistance with their parenting skills and 44% thought that working with NRFs can complicate cases (Malm et al., 2006). These findings about worker beliefs are discouraging, given that children have the right to know their family connections, fathers have the right to be involved in the decisions that affect their children, and fathers can positively contribute to their children's well-being.

In a follow-up study, *More About the Dads* (Malm, Zielewski, & Chen, 2008), it was found that children with involved fathers are more likely to be reunified and less likely to be adopted than children whose fathers are not involved. However, high levels of adoption for children with unknown or uninvolved fathers may indicate that many fathers are contacted simply to expedite permanency planning or to terminate parental rights (American Humane, American Bar Association Center for Children and the Law, & the National Fatherhood Initiative, 2007). In addition, well-being outcomes were improved for children whose fathers had provided both financial and non-financial support, and had visited their child at least once (Malm et al., 2008). This finding again demonstrates that having a highly involved father can have a positive impact on a child.

In 2001, the U.S. Children's Bureau began conducting its first round of Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs). These CFSRs revealed numerous notable findings about parental involvement. For example, mothers are more likely than fathers to receive services; workers are inconsistent in involving fathers in case planning; fathers had fewer visitations with children in foster care; visits with fathers were often not of sufficient quality; the needs of fathers were assessed and met inconsistently and less often than the needs of mothers; less attention was given to



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promoting children's bonds with fathers; and efforts to locate, contact, and/or engage fathers were insufficient or inconsistent (Velazquez, Jenkins, Idczak, & Thornton, 2009).

Barriers to Father Involvement

Identifying and locating NRFs is the first step in involving them in their children's lives. However, 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 NRFs 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.

Furthermore, men may engage differently with workers and children than do women; for instance, men are often more task-oriented and may be less likely to ask for help or show emotions. Fathers may also be more active with their children and give them more freedom and opportunities to explore (American Humane et al., 2007). Workers should recognize these behaviors as differences rather than deficits. In addition, having more male caseworkers may help foster positive engagement and promote relationship development and rapport with fathers (Howard, 2009).

Despite these barriers to father involvement, some child welfare agencies have begun to use publicly available search tools to locate NRFs, such as Family Finding. Family Finding is a set of people-locating tools and strategies that offers methods to locate and engage relatives of children living in out-of-home care. The goal of Family Finding is to provide each child with lifelong family connections (Center for Family Finding and Youth Connectedness, 2009).

Family Group Decision Making: An Innovative Practice

Once NRFs and paternal extended family members are identified and located, family group decision making (FGDM) can further engage them in case-planning and decision-making processes. FGDM is a promising child welfare practice being implemented throughout the United States and in 22 other countries. FGDM values and philosophies 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 FGDM is that the extended family constellation, which includes NRFs and resident fathers and their families, is entitled to participate in making decisions about the children's safety and well-being. Excluding fathers and paternal kin could limit "the range of informal supports" (Schmid, 2006, p. 23); including them, on the other hand, 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). Additionally, research shows that child welfare agencies in the U.S. have identified FGDM meetings as beneficial for engaging fathers and paternal relatives in case planning (Pennell, 2007). For example, one study revealed that family group conferences are more effective in involving paternal relatives in case planning than are other "family-centered family preservation services"; there was an average of three paternal relatives attending a conference, whereas "very few fathers" were involved in other case-planning procedures (Gunderson, Cahn, & Wirth, 2003, p. 44).

FGDM and other family engagement approaches typically occur in phases, including the preparation phase, the conference, and the conference follow-up. The engagement of fathers throughout every phase of the process is critical. The coordinator, who is independent of the case and whose responsibility it is to partner with the family to make the family circle as far-ranging as possible, makes conscious efforts to connect with fathers, paternal family members, and male relatives during the preparation phase (Schmid, 2006). Simultaneously, when the relationship between



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the mother and father is strained, non-existent, or volatile, the coordinator is also working with the female caregiver around the father's participation. Coordinators and other professionals should "speak to the involvement and protective capacities [that] men offer to the family" both during the actual conference and when the family implements its plan and acquires services (Schmid, 2006, p. 27).

When Domestic Violence Is Present

It is important to acknowledge that involving fathers who have been abusive to their families in FGDM processes may be cause for concern and/or controversy. In cases of domestic and family violence, "safeguarding" the entire family both during and after the conference may be viewed as challenging (Pennell, 2007, p. 4). Common concerns about involving fathers who have abused their partners and their families include: survivors will feel unsafe or will be blamed for not protecting their children from witnessing the abuse; survivors will be blamed if the father does not follow through with the agreed-upon plan; the father will manipulate his partner and the family, and the process and/or their actions will be compromised; survivors will be coerced to forgive their abusive partners and/or couples will be pressured to stay together "at the expense of those victimized"; and the conference will provoke later retaliation and continued and/or worsened family violence (Pennell, 2007, p. 5; Inglis, 2009). While it is important to address and validate these reservations, it would be harmful for children and families to completely eliminate the option of FGDM and/or to exclude all abusive fathers from the process. Furthermore, since child maltreatment and domestic violence are often occurring simultaneously (and the extent of domestic violence may not be apparent), it may be difficult for workers to limit their FGDM referrals to families in which no domestic violence has occurred (Pennell, 2004).

The keys to making FGDM work in cases of family and domestic violence include thorough preparation and careful attention to plan details, including commitment to following through with the plan's tasks and objectives (Pennell, 2007). In preparing to conduct FGDM with a family with domestic violence

issues, the worker should: consult with domestic violence advocates about the process; ask survivors about their concerns and wishes and prioritize their needs; encourage survivors to bring trusted support people to the conference; and develop plans to cancel or postpone the conference if participants feel unsafe (Pennell, 2004). In cases where a no-contact/restraining order exists between the partners, the worker should respect those orders and make efforts to uphold them (Pennell, 2007). However, rather than excluding the father from the process, the worker should try to devise how he may still be involved, such as by having the mother participate for the first part of the conference and then involving the father after she has left (Pennell, 2007). It is important to remember and to honor the fact that the father and his family are still important people in the lives of their children, and that children benefit from complete and diverse family connections. Even if a father cannot be involved in his child's life, his family may be a valuable addition to the child's life. Although limited in scope, research has shown positive findings regarding FGDM and families with domestic violence issues. A Canadian study found that "violence did not occur during or after a meeting because of the conference," and that indicators of child maltreatment and domestic violence decreased for families that had participated in a conference (in comparison to those families that did not experience FGDM) (Pennell, 2007, p. 5).

Expanding the Family Network

FGDM acknowledges that issues such as power differentials (in addition to power issues that arise with domestic violence) and culture can impact families and decisions, as well as paternal involvement and engagement. All caregivers' viewpoints and experiences warrant consideration and respect during the FGDM planning process (Schmid, 2006). Involving the widest constellation of family in decision-making and case-planning processes provides numerous benefits to children, including healthy cognitive, social, and emotional development; an expansion in placement options; a growth in knowledge about the child and his or her family; and an increase in opportunities for the child to remain connected with his or her father and other family members, thus enhancing the likelihood of permanent placements,



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connections, and stability (Howard, 2009). In addition, involving multiple family members helps ensure the success of the plan, and may increase the likelihood of plan approval by child welfare (Pennell, 2007).

Simply stated, dads and paternal relatives should no longer be sidelined, excluded, or marginalized in the lives of their children, and the use of FGDM helps prevent this. More research is needed on the engagement of fathers in processes such as FGDM, but it is clear that children benefit from having fathers and paternal relatives involved in their lives. Likewise, involving fathers, paternal kin, and male relatives in family engagement approaches will benefit children and families by enhancing supportive connections in their lives. For more information on FGDM, please see <http://www.americanhumane.org/protecting-children/programs/family-group-decision-making>. For more information on involving fathers, please see <http://www.americanhumane.org/protecting-children/programs/fatherhood>.

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About the Authors

Molly Jenkins, MSW, and Ellen Kinney, MA, are program assistants with American Humane.

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