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Exploring Child Welfare Workers' Attitudes and Practice With Fathers

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Introduction

Father involvement is necessary to promote healthy children in stable environments. The research shows that when children have a secure, supportive, sensitive, warm, and reciprocal relationship with their fathers, they are more likely to be well adjusted (Lamb, 2010) and to have other positive psychosocial (Lamb, 2010; Palkovitz, 2002) and behavioral outcomes (Pleck, 2010) outcomes. Father involvement also contributes to overall family well-being and leads to less domestic violence and less maternal involvement in Child Protective Services (Shapiro, Krysik, & Pennar, 2011). One of the most critical problems that the child welfare system in the U.S. is experiencing, however, is that many fathers have little involvement with their children or are altogether absent from their children's lives. In 2003, only 54% of children in foster care had contact with their fathers in the span of a year, compared to 72% of children in the general population (Malm, 2003).

Recent studies have identified various barriers to child welfare-involved fathers' involvement with their children and with the child welfare agency. They include societal factors (e.g., poverty, discrimination) (Earner, 2007; Gordon, Oliveros, Hawes, Iwamoto, & Rayford, 2012; Harris & Marmer, 1996), fathers' personal challenges, such as inadequate parenting skills (see O'Donnell, Johnson, D'Aunno, & Thornton, 2005), children's mothers' interference with healthy father-child relationships (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011), and agency practices and policies (Coakley, 2013; Behnke, Taylor, & Parra-Cardonna, 2008; Earner, 2007; Malm, Zielewski, & Chen, 2008). These barriers are especially problematic because when fathers do not participate in the case planning process, then the child welfare agency considers them noncompliant or unsuitable as a permanent placement option. Child welfare agencies can create favorable outcomes for children in out-of-home placements by minimizing barriers and engaging fathers in the case planning process.

A fundamental challenge for engaging fathers relates to problems in agency practices and social worker attitudes. Unfortunately, there have been minimal efforts to optimize the strengths of fathers, especially those from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds with low incomes (Behnke et al., 2008; Earner, 2007). Due to changes in family structure and patterns, it is important to define the term 'father.' In this study, 'father' refers to a child's biological father, as well as other 'father figures' or 'social fathers,' 'step fathers,' or 'adoptive fathers' (Featherstone, 2001). These are terms used in the literature to indicate those recognized by the child welfare agency as the responsible adult male associated with a child's case.

This study aimed to identify the types of challenges involved in engaging fathers in child welfare case planning. We also sought to discover strength-based father engagement efforts informed by child welfare agency workers' attitudes and practice regarding working effectively with fathers. Specifically, the study put forward these questions:

1. How do agency workers feel about working with fathers?
2. What do agency workers think the barriers are to fathers' involvement with their children?
3. What do agency workers think the barriers are to fathers' engagement with the child welfare agency?
4. What are specific ways that agency workers can effectively work with fathers?

Method

Study Design and Sample

The authors conducted this cross-sectional study from January 2010 to September 2010. We employed a purposive sampling method due to the exploratory nature of this study. A public child welfare agency in the southeast was selected based on previous collaborations between the first author and the agency director to study the agency's efforts to engage fathers. For the present study, the agency director agreed to inform the child welfare agency workers about the study. A total of 35 child welfare agency personnel contacted the research team about the study and 27 agreed to participate. The participants included an agency counselor, agency personnel from the Child Protective Services (CPS) and Foster Care Units and administrative units from Greensboro and High Point, North Carolina. The study's procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Data Collection

The respondents completed a 27-item paper-pen survey in-person within a private conference room at the child welfare agency. The first author developed an instrument to gather socio-demographic information on child welfare workers and their opinions about working with fathers. The first nine items asked for background information, which included "race" and "length of time participants had been employed as a child welfare worker." The participants also completed 15 items about their opinions on barriers and supports for child welfare-involved fathers. They were instructed to rate the reasons they believe fathers have not been involved with their social worker/DSS, based on their experience. A sample item was, *"Problems with the child's mother affected the father's involvement (1 =*

Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly agree)." Three open-ended items solicited agency workers' knowledge about specific ways the child welfare agency could support fathers, ways fathers could be supported in the community, and ways social workers could use race and gender specific practices to convey that they respected and valued fathers. We asked workers to write two different answers for each of those items. Approximate completion time for the survey was 10 minutes.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to calculate participant responses for scale items. Two research assistants (one Caucasian male and one African American female) transcribed text from open-ended questions. The author used a content analysis method to examine text; content analysis is the "technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the context of their use" (Krippendorff, 2004, p.18). The authors' experience and knowledge, as well as the previous literature informed the analytical constructs in this study. The first author developed codes to answer the primary research questions and coded data. Several research team members reviewed the data and results to ensure the reliability of the coding process. The codes and recommendations were also shared with the participants as a way of member checking, to ensure the codes developed were confirmed by participant perspectives and experiences.

Results

Child Welfare Workers' Characteristics

A total of 27 child welfare services workers, supervisors, and administrators who worked on behalf of children in DSS custody participated in the study. Twenty-two were females and five were males. More than half of the workers were African American (55.6%), 40.7% were Caucasian and 3.7% were biracial. Most were married or partnered (63%). Their ages ranged from 20 to 30 years (3.7%), 31 to 40 years (44.4%), 41 to 50 years (48.1%), and 51 or above (3.7%). Workers identified as Christian (37%), Baptist (18.5%), Methodist (3.7%), Catholic (11.1%), or Protestant (3.7%). Some did not report affiliation with a particular religion or did not answer the question (27.8%). Additionally, most participants held a Bachelor's or 4 year college degree (51.9%) or an advanced college degree (33.3%). Nearly half had worked in child welfare services for 10 or more years (48.1%). Table 1 gives a complete list of workers' characteristics.

Table 1. Workers' Characteristics

| <i>Variable (n = 27)</i> | <i>%</i> |
|--|----------|
| Child Welfare Work Experience | |
| Less than a year | 11.1 |
| 1 to 2 years | 3.7 |
| 3 to 5 years | 3.7 |
| 6 to 9 years | 22.2 |
| 10 or more years | 48.1 |
| Did not respond | 11.1 |
| Race/Ethnicity | |
| African American | 55.6 |
| Caucasian | 40.7 |
| Biracial | 3.7 |
| Gender | |
| Male | 18.5 |
| Female | 81.5 |
| Age | |
| 20-30 | 3.7 |
| 31-40 | 44.4 |
| 41-50 | 48.1 |
| 51-60 | 3.7 |
| Education | |
| Bachelors degree/4 year college degree | 53.8 |
| Advanced college degree | 34.6 |
| Other | 11.1 |
| Did not answer | 3.7 |
| Employment | |
| Full-time | 96.3 |
| Part-time | 3.7 |
| Annual Income | |
| \$30,000-\$39,000 | 3.7 |
| \$40,000-\$49,000 | 44.4 |
| \$50,000 or above | 51.9 |
| Marital Status | |
| Single | 14.8 |
| Married/Partnered | 63.0 |
| Divorced/Separated | 22.2 |
| Religion | |
| Christian | 43.5 |
| Baptist | 21.7 |
| Protestant | 4.3 |
| Catholic | 13.0 |
| Methodist | 4.3 |
| No preference/None | 13.0 |
| Did not answer | 14.8 |

The authors also asked workers about their contact and relationships with their own fathers growing up. The majority of them reported that together, their mothers and fathers raised them (55.6%). Others were raised by their fathers and mothers in separate homes (7.4%), by their fathers only (3.7%), their mothers only (14.8%), or other (12%). Most workers (70.8%) reported having strong healthy relationships with their own fathers.

Feelings about Working with Fathers

The child welfare workers said that overall, they felt equally comfortable working with fathers (96.3%) and mothers (96.3%). However, 23% "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that difficulties in personally connecting with fathers had eventually led to fathers' parental rights being terminated. Most workers (79.9%) also reported that some fathers' noncompliance with the case plan had ultimately led to the relinquishment or termination of their parental rights (79.9%).

All but one worker understood how their attitudes/behaviors might affect fathers' involvement (96.1%). Only a few (16%) reported that they mainly talked to mothers directly (i.e., maintained eye contact with her only, contacted her by phone) when sharing information, even when fathers were present, since the mother would ultimately be the one working to get custody of the child. Similarly, only a few workers (16%) reported that they addressed the mothers rather than the fathers because they felt fathers did not seem as interested as mothers.

There was a statistically significant correlation between workers' with a strong, healthy relationship with their own fathers and their overall comfort working with the child's father ($\gamma = .631$, $T = 2.50$, $p = .012$). Additionally, workers' awareness of how their attitudes could affect father engagement was related to their overall comfort working with the child's father ($\gamma = .596$, $T = 2.02$, $p = .043$).

Most workers stated that they knew specific ways to effectively engage fathers in the permanency planning process (96%) or empower fathers to be involved in raising or supporting their children (96.3%). Additionally, they reported being knowledgeable about specific ways to document and track fathers' involvement with permanency planning and their children (88.9%).

The vast majority "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" that fathers' involvement should be restricted because of excessive child support problems (96.3%), or inadequate housing (96.2%). However, most "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that fathers' involvement should not be supported by the agency if there were safety issues (88.5%). Additionally,

14.8% "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that incarceration was a valid reason to refuse fathers' involvement. However, the survey did not ask workers to explain whether they meant incarceration for any crime or for a particular type of crime.

Barriers for Fathers

The child welfare workers surveyed reported that the major reasons for fathers' lack of involvement with their children were problems with their children's mothers, alcohol and drug problems, and lack of a valid address or working telephone to be contacted. Figure 1 gives a complete list of reported barriers to the father-child relationship. Workers also responded to questions about father-agency barriers. According to these workers, the major barriers to father engagement were: fathers not feeling comfortable with the child welfare agency and distrusting the agency; fathers being a "no show" for agency appointments; fathers not returning calls from the social worker and; fathers not having a valid address or working telephone to be contacted by the social worker. Figure 2 gives a complete list of father-agency barriers.

Figure 1. Reasons for Father-Child Barriers

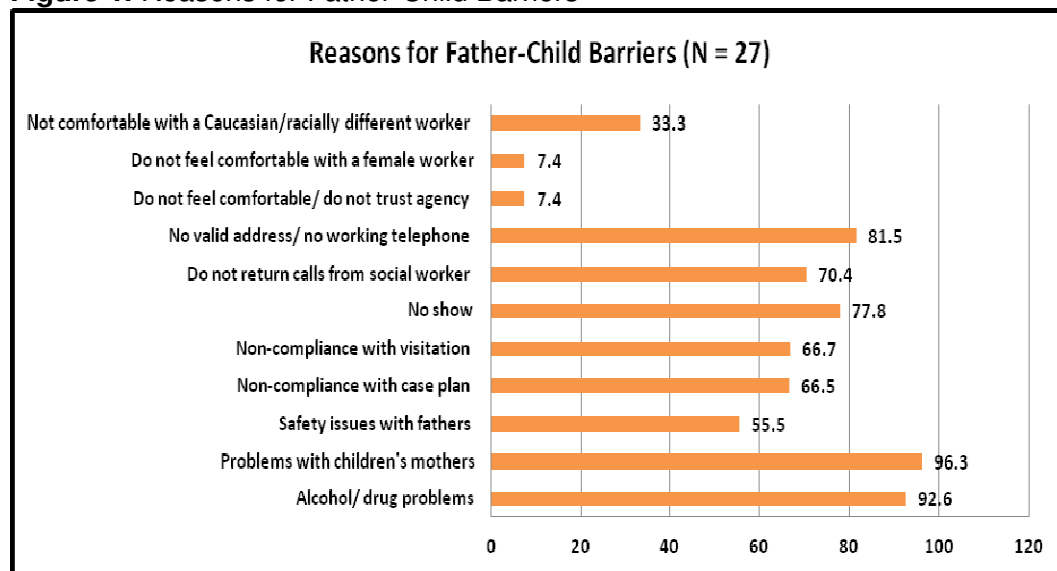
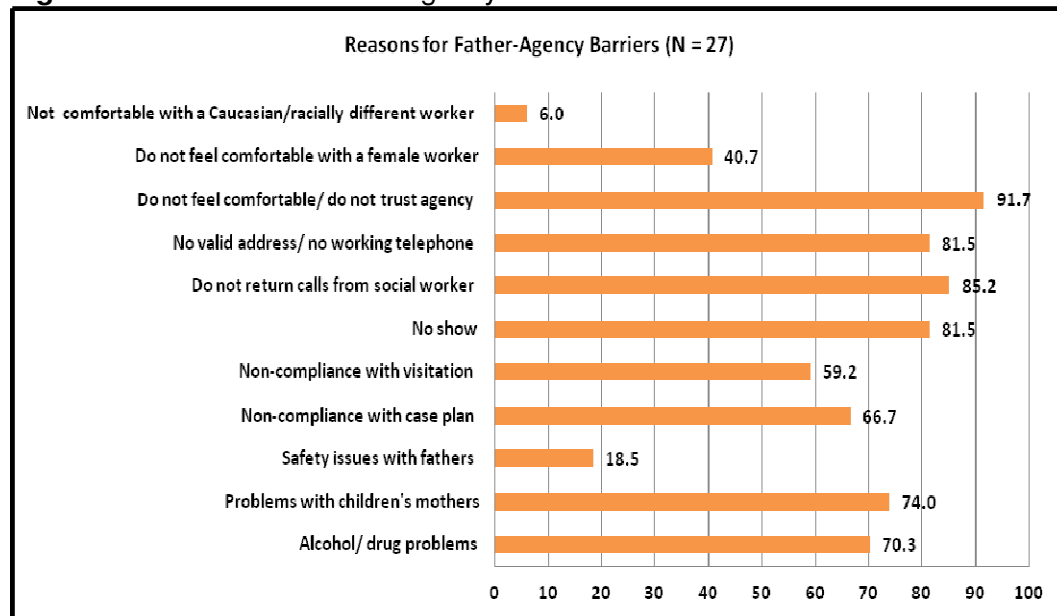


Figure 2. Reasons for Father-Agency Barriers

Suggestions for Effectively Engaging Fathers

Three open-ended questions solicited workers' suggestions for specific ways to work effectively with fathers. Using an etic approach (Marlow 2010; Strauss & Corbin, 1988), the first author created four overarching categories that would likely encapsulate a universe of themes concerning effective work with fathers: (a) use diligent efforts that ensure that fathers are present to contribute, (b) provide equitable services, support, and policies for fathers, (c) address father-specific needs, and (d) promote a positive worker-father relationship.

Use diligent efforts to ensure that fathers are present to contribute.

Eight themes emerged regarding what workers felt was important to ensure that fathers were present to take part in the case planning process. Overwhelmingly, they felt diligent efforts to identify, locate, contact, and engage fathers were needed in order to achieve this. Several reported a need to ensure that fathers were included in completing the case plan and visiting with their children. Another frequent theme was workers' respect for fathers' rights and roles. Table 2 gives a complete list of these themes.

Table 2. Diligent Efforts to Ensure that Fathers are Present to Contribute.

| Diligent Efforts to Ensure that Fathers are Present to Contribute | f |
|--|----|
| Involve fathers in case planning, permanency planning/Identify, locate, contact, and engage fathers in all meetings | 25 |
| Give fathers visitation/Assist with transportation to visitations with their children/ Provide a neutral setting for visitation and support staff to encourage positive and ongoing visitation | 7 |
| Respect fathers' rights and roles/ Acknowledge fathers' importance in reunification process | 6 |
| Early communication/ Call fathers about behavior and health issues | 3 |
| Create an inviting atmosphere/Go to where the father is as opposed to him coming to you all the time | 3 |
| Have expectation that fathers will be involved | 1 |
| Establish paternity | 1 |

Provide equitable services, supports, and policies for fathers. There were five themes that emerged in this category. Workers believed that they could effectively work with fathers if the fathers had access to the same types of services and supports that the mothers received. The most popular strategy was to offer fathers the same housing assistance as mothers. Other strategies included offering fathers the same financial assistance or public assistance as mothers, such as Temporary Aid to Needy Families and food stamps. Also, workers stated that treating fathers and mothers equally is an important part of social work practice. Table 3 gives a complete list of these strategies.

Table 3. Provide Equitable Services, Supports, and Policies for Fathers.

| Provide Equitable Services, Supports, and Policies for Fathers | f |
|--|---|
| Help fathers with housing | 4 |
| Allow fathers the same financial assistance to solely support their children as the mothers/ Temporary Aid to Needy Families/ Food stamps/ Women Infants and Children assistance | 4 |
| Share equally information about reunification/ Visit and talk with fathers as much | 3 |

| | |
|--|---|
| as the mother/ Treat as equal parent | |
| Offer a deal with child support (lower payments)/Assist with child support | 2 |
| Offer fathers same training as mothers | 2 |

Address father-specific needs. This category is comprised of nine themes. Workers felt that fathers were in a unique situation that required an approach different from that normally offered by the child welfare agency. They frequently suggested that fathers could benefit from community services related to fathers, father support groups, and mental health services. In addition, workers felt that fathers could benefit from housing assistance, substance abuse services, court and legal assistance, and groups led by other fathers. Table 4 gives a complete list of these strategies.

Table 4. Address Father-Specific Needs.

| Address Father-Specific Needs | f |
|--|----|
| Services, training, parenting classes, workshops, mentor groups specifically relating to fathers/Groups facilitated by other fathers | 23 |
| Counseling and case management for mental health and substance abuse issues | 8 |
| Community services/Outreach services/Faith-based services | 5 |
| Link to housing authority | 4 |
| Seek support from family and friends/Mother-father planning groups/Father-child groups | 4 |
| Employment services | 2 |
| Attend court hearing with fathers/Court-legal rights | 2 |
| Educate the community to look at fathers in a different light | 1 |
| DSS mediation | 1 |

Promote a positive worker-father relationship. Seven themes emerged for this category. The workers mostly felt that a positive relationship between them and fathers could be achieved if workers were aware of their own biases. They also felt it was important for them to maintain eye contact with fathers and use culture and gender sensitivity. Also, one strategy offered by workers was to listen to fathers about the ways they felt would assist them best. The most popular strategy was to ask fathers what they needed from the social worker or agency to meet their needs and their family's needs. A complete list of these strategies is in Table 5.

Table 5. Promote a Positive Worker-Father Relationship.

| Promote a Positive Worker-Father Relationship | f |
|---|---|
| Workers should be aware of their own biases | 6 |
| Make eye contact with fathers/ Treat fathers with respect | 7 |
| Ask fathers what they need from the social worker/Ask their opinion about how to assist them and put it into practice | 5 |
| Cultural and gender training for workers/ Be sensitive to race/gender issues | 4 |
| Suspend personal assumptions or judgments about fathers | 4 |
| Communicate with fathers/Use open-ended questions | 4 |
| Empower fathers | 4 |

Limitations

This study involved a small sample of social workers from one agency in the southeast, and therefore the results might not be generalizable to other populations or communities. This group might have been more knowledgeable about father engagement efforts than other workers in public child welfare agencies in the U.S. They worked in an agency cognizant of the benefits of father involvement; indeed, the agency was one of several selected nationally by the Annie E. Casey Foundation to participate in efforts to reduce the number of minority children in care through enhanced father engagement efforts. Future efforts should ensure a representative sample from agencies with varying father engagement efforts.

Another limitation was the survey, which was not a standardized instrument. Additionally, the information provided on the survey items was brief. Additional research efforts could include key-informant interviews and asking workers open ended questions about their views and experiences of engaging fathers successfully in the process. This would also allow the interviewer an opportunity to ask follow-up questions to confirm and understanding of respondents' answers.

Discussion

This study provided first-hand reports from child welfare agency personnel about how they viewed father engagement barriers, worker and agency

limitations, and how they could improve their work with fathers. The findings suggest that child welfare agency practices and social workers' attitudes convey how open agencies are to working with fathers. These coincided with earlier research that indicated that if fathers do not feel that the child welfare agency values or respects them, they might decide not to work with social workers towards permanency (O'Donnell et al., 2005). Moreover, in a previous qualitative study of child welfare-involved fathers' perspectives, the fathers noted various child welfare agency practices that promoted and inhibited their involvement (Coakley, 2013). They reported that workers who were compassionate motivated them to achieve the case plan goals, while workers' negative attitudes were inhibitors to their involvement. Brown, Callahan, Strega, Walmsley, and Dominelli's (2009) study also revealed the child welfare agency's disinterest and inability to engage fathers or acknowledge them as a valuable member of the family.

Clearly, emphasis needs to be on services delivered in a manner that conveys that fathers are worthy, the agency is on their side, and fathers can be hopeful they will remain in their children's lives. For instance, our findings indicated that workers felt that fairer practices with fathers would include making services for them equitable to those received by mothers, involving fathers in every aspect of the case planning process, using eye contact, and creating an inviting atmosphere for fathers. Research shows that fathers often have negative experiences with the child welfare workers who reportedly do not treat them with respect, ignore their presence during agency meetings, or provide the mothers with financial assistance, but not the fathers who were raising their children (Coakley, 2013). Workers' lack of preparedness to work effectively with fathers is an issue that has been receiving increasing attention amongst researchers because it has implications for children's safety and permanence (Malm, Murray, & Geen, 2006; O'Donnell et al. 2005). According to Malm et al. (2006), caseworkers who received father engagement training were significantly more likely to share the case plan with fathers, significantly more likely to consider the fathers as possible placements for the children, and significantly more likely to work with fathers who expressed interest in having their children live with them.

To address father engagement challenges, the workers from this study overwhelmingly indicated the importance of promoting father engagement through diligent efforts, which entail identifying the fathers of children in care, as well as their whereabouts, and then effectively involving them in the case plan process. This finding illustrates the disconnect however between what workers feel is the ideal manner in which to work with fathers and the actual manner in which they work with

fathers. Because workers from the current study possess knowledge about effective strategies for father engagement, yet report father-child and father-agency barriers which may be due to their own attitudes and agency practices, future research may need to examine barriers at an administrative level, including public policies and eligibility requirements and agency protocol, before dealing with worker-level issues such as training. This suggestion is supported by previous research that have indicated that workers desired to have more input in policy decisions made by administrators, and that agency administrators were more concerned with implementing policy than effective child and family practice (Lieberman, Hornby, & Russell, 1988; Westbrook & Crolley-Simic, 2012).

Cultural and gender differences were reported as other barriers to fathers' involvement. Moreover, most workers reported that fathers were uncomfortable with those differences between the workers and them. The majority of this study's sample was college-educated middle-class women and they had had a positive experience growing up with both parents in their lives. These factors are atypical of child welfare-involved fathers' current situation with their children, and thus could present problems with fathers' and workers' ability to relate to or accept each other's perspectives. Previous research reported on case workers lack of effort and unwillingness to involve fathers partially because of fathers' negative behavior and circumstances (O'Donnell, 1999; 2001; O'Donnell et al., 2005). However, research is needed about how other underlying reasons, such as cultural and gender differences, might contribute to viewing them in a negative light such as that.

Workers from our study stated that there needs to be an agency commitment to train child welfare workers to use culturally competent and gender sensitive practices with fathers. In addition, they said agencies need to evaluate their current practices and policies for public programs and financial assistance which maintain eligibility requirements that exclude fathers. As stated earlier we feel that this is an important point because there are fathers who are sole financial providers, and fathers who will assume custody of their children who also experience severe economic pressures. In regard to the seriousness of this issue, the recent economic recession had a devastating effect on noncustodial fathers which led to many experiencing difficulties securing full-time employment during the recession. According to the 2010 U.S. Census report, the number of men working full time was 6.6 million lower than in 2007 (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, Smith, & U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Therefore, as with mothers, there needs to be a way to provide fathers with

temporary financial, housing, and sustenance assistance to help them support their children.

The findings also have implications for helping fathers in nontraditional ways (i.e., other than at the child welfare agency) to deal with their parenting and coparenting issues, and their coping. Nearly all the workers reported that they felt problems with the children's mothers created barriers to father involvement. It is well documented that when there is no longer a romantic relationship between the parents, fathers face challenges with visitation and opportunities to develop the father child relationship (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011). In addition, mothers often resort to gatekeeping and demonstrate other negative behavior when they are not satisfied with the amount of child support from fathers with low incomes (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011). For example, mothers might obstruct the father-relationship by denying nonresident fathers child visitation or they might talk negatively about the fathers in their children's presence (Author, 2013). Therefore, child welfare agencies could focus on effective coparenting strategies that are associated with higher levels of father engagement for this group of fathers.

Workers from the study also stressed a need for fathers to receive counseling or mental health services to address their emotional and psychological problems, and recommended that the agency link those fathers to additional creative, father-focused, and father-run programs external to the child welfare agency. They also noted that fathers lack knowledge of child caring duties, which can pose a risk to their children. Currently, the child welfare agency refers all parents with inadequate parenting skills to other agencies for parent education services. However, parent education that is specifically designed for fathers may be a way to address the differential instruction needed for fathers—especially nonresident fathers since they face unique barriers. This seems to be an important issue since previous research has shown that fathers report growing up receiving fragmented information and negative examples about fatherhood (Coakley, 2013).

Finally, a high frequency of the workers surveyed noted a need to listen to fathers about what they say their needs are before making decisions or recommendations for their children and families. Assessing fathers can be a quick and easy way to assist social workers in determining—with fathers' input—the type and level of support needed for fathers to properly care for their children.

Conclusion

The relationship between child welfare agency workers and fathers is important, and can affect the extent of fathers' involvement and ultimately children's well-being. Therefore, it is crucial for workers to understand how various barriers can inhibit father involvement. They must further demonstrate a nonjudgmental, positive attitude towards working with fathers who face those challenges. In addition, administrators must permit child welfare workers to implement innovative practices to address fathers' barriers, and empower these fathers to parent effectively and support their families. Specifically, our findings suggest a need for child welfare agency administrators to shift their practice efforts towards specialized father-focused services delivered in a non-traditional manner. Future research should investigate the feasibility of an intervention that includes an array of supportive agency and community services to address fathers' economic, personal, coparenting, and agency barriers.

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